



Monster Tamer: Volume 4

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Chapter 1: The End to a Quiet Day

I sank deeper and deeper. Darkness shrouded my surroundings. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't touch anything. It felt somehow familiar, and I suddenly realized I was dreaming. This was that nightmare I had seen once before.

It came to me one month after I arrived in this world. Following the destruction of the temporary housing we students built, the Colony, I ended up wandering through the forest. There I met my servants, monsters of this world, and began living in that cave. One evening, after I encountered my former classmate Kaga and killed him in retaliation for trying to take my life, I had a very similar dream to the one I was having now. Although, I didn't feel the suffocating isolation this time. I could sense something on the other side of the heavy darkness. It brought me peace of mind.

It was just a dream, yet it was somehow strange for one. I still had no idea what it all meant, however. My consciousness eventually began surfacing from the darkness. Still unable to see anything, feel anything, or know anything, I woke up.

"Morning, Master."

I slowly opened my eyes and looked to the side. There sat a girl, completely naked, staring back at me. Everything below the charming curves of her waist was hidden beneath the sheets, whereas nothing at all was hiding her dazzling upper body.

In a sense, it was an overly stimulating sight. If it were nighttime, I might not have been able to hold back my rising urges... Or perhaps I couldn't stop myself last night precisely because it was late. Her body arching in the dark room. Her sweet breath. The coquettish voice which spilled from her lips. I relived the luscious memories of the previous night. I normally suppressed such desires, so this might have led to my brakes malfunctioning.

"You can sleep a little longer if you want," she said sweetly, stretching her slender hand out to my cheek. The soft sensation of her palm and her kind warmth did spur on my urge to act a little needy, but...

"...No, I'll get up. Morning, Lily." I shook my head and got myself up from bed. "Now that I think of it... Last time, Rose was nearby, wasn't she?"

"What do you mean?" Lily asked curiously as she sat up next to

me.

My power, inherent to those who were transported to this world—called a cheat by us and a blessing by the locals—allowed me to communicate with the hearts of monsters. Lily seemed to find it strange that I would bring up the name of my second servant born of this power. She pulled the sheets up to her breasts and cocked her head curiously.

“What about Rose?” she asked.

“Nothing. I was just having a strange dream.”

“Hmm. What kind of dream?”

“It was... Uhh... What was it?”

Even a dream that left a deep impression dissolved like sugar in coffee once awake. That was simply what dreams were. There was no longer any tangible trace of what I had seen in my mind.

“Geez. Are you still half asleep?” Lily said with a chuckle.

“...Maybe.”

I wasn’t a morning person. This was routine. That was why neither Lily nor I paid it any mind.

This was the morning of my fourth day at Fort Tilia, the beginning of a quiet day.



Lily helped me dress while I remained in a groggy state. I sat on the edge of the bed looking up at her smile, which seemed fifty percent brighter than usual.

“...You seem to be in a good mood,” I said.

“Oh?”

Lily slightly inclined her head and picked up the little blowfox Ayame in her arms, whose fluffy tail had been beating the ground in anticipation. After soothing the parasite creeper Asarina, who was stretching out of the back of my left hand, Lily took a seat next to me.

“Hehehe. I mean, I got to recharge a whole lot last night.”

“...I see. Good for you.”

I sat there in a daze wondering what she had recharged as I waited for my sluggish thoughts to wake up. After a short while, a knock resounded throughout the room.

“...Ayame, Asarina.”

Fort Tilia was constructed to stand against the monsters that ran rampant in the Woodlands, a special forest thick with mana. It was one of the bridgeheads protecting humanity. While it was fine for visitors to see the mimic slime Lily, who could imitate the appearance of the late Mizushima Miho, I couldn’t possibly let anyone see Ayame or Asarina, seeing how they were very clearly monsters.

“Sorry for making you stay in such cramped places.”

“Kuu!”

“Mass—ter!”

The two monsters responded as if to tell me not to worry about them and then hid themselves before Lily went to greet our visitor. A boy in glasses with a rather nerdy personality was on the other side of the door. It was my friend from before we were sent to this world, Kaneki Mikihiko.

“Morning, Mizushima.”

“Mm. Morning, Kaneki.”

After greeting Lily, who was acting as Mizushima Miho, Mikihiko walked over to me. I had no idea what was going through his mind, but he gave me a sly smile.

“I’m heeeere.”

“...Morning.”

“You just totally ignored me. What a friend. Actually, you still look kinda sleepy, Takahiro,” Mikihiko said in exasperation before his eyes immediately shot open. “A boy and girl all alone in a room. And you, here, sleepy... I-Is this the legendary *morning after*?!”

“...You know I’ve never been a morning person.”

“Oh. Right. Tahaha. Sorry ’bout that. Still, Takahiro, you nonchalantly let my comment slip by. What do you think about that, Mizushima?”

“Huh? Ooh, hmm... I wonder? Teehee.”

“So! Pro! Found! I shouldn’t have asked! Commander! Comfort me...! I guess there’s no way, huh. Her guard is way too strong, but goddammit, I love that part of her too!”

“...You sure are energetic first thing in the morning,” I said, looking up at Mikihiko with half-opened eyes. “So, what do you need? Shiran isn’t coming this morning.”

Shiran was the first human of this world I met since being teleported here—specifically, an elf—and she’d taught me much about this unfamiliar world. We also attended a memorial service for the dead together in the mausoleum. For the last two days, she had been teaching me the basics of swordsmanship. That was more or less how we were acquainted.

Arrangements were made so I could accompany her on her regular morning training when possible, but the young lieutenant of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights had work to do this morning. It seemed she was on patrol duty in the surrounding vicinity. Just recently, she had led a long-term expedition into the Depths to rescue the students who safely escaped the Colony. Normally, she wasn’t supposed to receive another dispatch order for a while. However, the Alliance Knights were short on manpower. They needed all the hands they could get.

It was rather unfortunate. Given the opportunity, I had something I wanted to speak with her about. Seeing that she wasn't coming this morning, I had no choice but to postpone that until the opportunity arose. There would surely be plenty of chances for us to speak so long as I remained in this fortress.

"Oh. I heard the lieutenant is busy this morning," Mikihiko said, waving his hand loosely in the air. "Actually, I'm planning on helping out the commander too, so I can't participate in training anyways."

"What, you too?"

"Yup. I need to head back pretty soon. She'll be pissed if I'm late. She can be a scary lady."

Mikihiko's cheerful tone conveyed how crazy he was about the woman who served as the commander of the Third Company. He had gone through the same hell as I did on the day the Colony fell. The commander was to him as Lily was to me. I could understand his behavior very well in this regard.

"...Hm? So, what did you come here for?"

"Oh, right. About Kei. She's coming here today again, right?"

"Yeah."

I had Shiran's niece Kei assigned to be our attendant. This was largely a means to protect her. Just the other day, she was almost assaulted by one of the students, Sakagami Gouta. Fortunately, we managed to avert this thanks to Lily's efforts, but we couldn't do anything about the source of evil itself.

The power we called cheats—which the locals called blessings—was an exceedingly useful resource in this world, constantly threatened by monsters as it was. There was in fact a track record of past visitors from other worlds protecting humanity, so the locals revered visitors from afar as saviors with almost religious fervor. In contrast, elves were historically treated less favorably. As an elf, Kei required the patronage of another visitor to protect her. This was the fastest way of resolving the situation.

"So, what about Kei?" I asked.

"It's better for her to avoid being alone as much as possible, yeah? So, I asked one of my acquaintances in the Alliances Knights to escort her here. He grumbled a bit, but the guy's got a stout character, so I don't think he'll step down even if Sakagami tries anything stupid. He's got a good excuse with her being your attendant and all. It's a personal request from me, too."

"I see. Sorry you had to do all that."

"Whatever, man. Don't worry about it. I also owe Kei a fair bit. I've got a bunch of other stuff laid out already."

Mikihiko grinned. I was a little curious why he seemed to be having so much fun, but seeing that Kei's safety hinged on this, he

wasn't doing anything imprudent. Contrary to his behavior, he wasn't one to screw around.



After that, Mikihiko quickly left just as he said he would. Lily and I also went to get breakfast together with the other students in one of the fortress's larger rooms.

"Morning, Majima. Mind if I sit next to you?"

When we took our seats, one of the students came by to see if he could join us. It was the upperclassman who spoke with us on the way to the fortress, the one that felt like a class peacemaker, Miyoshi Taichi.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Thanks."

Much like how I was always with Lily, the students I came to this fortress with all had their own cliques. Miyoshi was followed by two boys and one girl. After getting my consent, they all took their seats next to us. At the same time, I felt a strange gaze affixed to me.

I looked around for the source. For some reason, the girl sitting diagonally across from me was looking at me with an inquisitive gaze.

"What is it?" I asked.

"...Um, Kaneki mentioned something to us yesterday... Majima, are you...?"

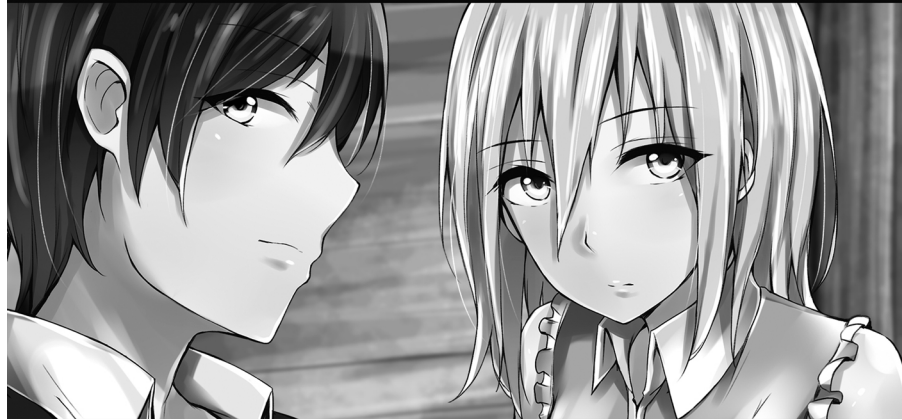
"Hey, Ryouko," Miyoshi said in a reproachful tone.

"Ahaha. Sorry. Never mind, it's nothing."

Her reaction was far too unnatural. I exchanged glances with Lily. She shrugged. It seemed neither of us had a single clue what was going on.

"Uhh, did Mikihiko tell you something about me?" I asked Miyoshi.

"It's really nothing. Don't worry about it."



That made me even more curious. I wanted to ask what was going on, but Miyoshi had no intention of continuing this conversation. The sight of Mikihiko's strangely amused smile from this morning came to mind. Maybe I had to have a little chat with him about this later.

In any case, there was no point in clinging to this topic any further. I gave up and quietly ate my breakfast. Miyoshi's group largely talked about the training they were getting at the fortress. The goal of said training was to awaken the power hidden within them as visitors from another world.

Such visitors were treated as saviors here. The way Miyoshi's group got all excited about their futures as heroes was perfectly natural, in a sense. Today's lesson was apparently going to be focused on the use of magic. This turned out to be a result of complaints that continuous physical training was too harsh on their physiques. I wondered if soon-to-be heroes should really be complaining about that, but perhaps such thoughts were merely born of my own sensibilities.

Similar topics were heating up at other tables as well. The two boys surrounded by Imperial Knights and soldiers had a particularly excited air about them. The one with the large build was Juumonji Tatsuya. The smaller one was Watanabe Yoshiki. They were both cheaters from the Colony's exploration team. They were also members of the first expeditionary force, the elite team that had gone east searching for the humans of this world.

The conversation around them seemed to focus on their participation in the combat training the other day. Juumonji and Watanabe didn't have any peculiar abilities. They were what we called warriors, those who simply possessed outstanding physical strength and mana. Cheaters instinctively knew how to use their own abilities, whereas warriors like them could apparently intuit what exactly needed to be done in a fight. They had displayed terrifying combat skills during training. I saw it for myself. I was actually rather impressed. They were sure to put their power on full display in today's magic training as well.

The two of them had already carved themselves an unshakeable position in this fortress. They were talking to the higher-ups with tremendously confident expressions.

"They're really impressive, huh?" Miyoshi muttered sincerely as he watched them.

"...Yeah."

I threw in an appropriate response. My words didn't really reflect my own thoughts, though. As I watched Juumonji smile and talk with the people of the fortress, I recalled his behavior when he showed up

during the incident with Sakagami and Kei.

“Seriously. How long do you plan on acting like this is home? This is another world. Why do I have to put up with some ass who can’t understand that everything here is different...?”

That was what Juumonji had said about Sakagami’s selfish behavior. He was right. I couldn’t agree more; this world was completely different from home. After getting caught up in the panic of the Colony’s destruction, nearly getting killed, and wandering around the Woodlands in misery and pain, there was no way I could possibly forget.

On the other hand, that was precisely why I couldn’t help but question his hero-like behavior when he knew this world was different. Of course, despite my thoughts, even I could acknowledge they’d been doing well.

Taking into account the situation and circumstances of this world—compounded with the accident just before our arrival at the fortress where the Skanda beautifully intercepted the bull wrigglers—everything that happened demonstrated such good luck it only heightened their image as heroes. Regardless, they still did well in gaining the trust of the higher-ups here and unifying the students. Their glorious journey as saviors was going smoothly. This was sure to apply to the other students here as well.

“We’re just getting started ourselves,” Miyoshi said to his friends, filled with hope for their promised future.



After breakfast, we returned to our room. On our way, my eyes came across a boy who was coming down the opposite side of the hallway.

“...Oh, Senpai.”

His slender face carried a timid expression. It was the bullied kid, Kudou Riku. Sakagami, the one who was using him as an errand boy, wasn’t anywhere in sight. Perhaps he was still asleep or something.

“G-Good morning...” Kudou greeted us then went to walk past us without stopping.

“Hang on, Kudou.”

“Wh-What is it?”

Kudou turned to me with a mix of fear and wonder on his face. It was understandable, considering how he was being used by Sakagami, but it didn’t feel good to be feared like this. I tried not to pay it too much attention.

“Thanks for yesterday,” I told him.

“...What for?”

“You tried to protect Kei from Sakagami, didn’t you? I thought I

should thank you for it.”

Kudou stood there blankly.

“Is Kei that girl’s name? If so, I didn’t do anything worth thanking me for. I said this yesterday too, but I wasn’t able to do anything.”

“That’s not true.”

I shook my head. Kudou tried to stop Sakagami from dragging Kei into that room to the point where he got punched for it. If not for that, we might not have made it in time.

“Kei was also grateful for what you did.”

“I just...couldn’t stand his self-centered behavior.”

Kudou averted his eyes and scratched his cheek. It seemed someone in the fortress who could use healing magic had treated his wound, seeing that the swelling in his cheek was gone.

“That’s all it was... If that’s all, I’ll excuse myself here.”

I watched Kudou’s back as he hurried off but then suddenly raised my voice. “Hey, Kudou.”

“Yes?” he said as he turned around.

“Yesterday, when you heard Juumonji complain about Sakagami acting like he did back home even though everything here is different, you said nothing had changed at all, right?”

Kudou remained silent.

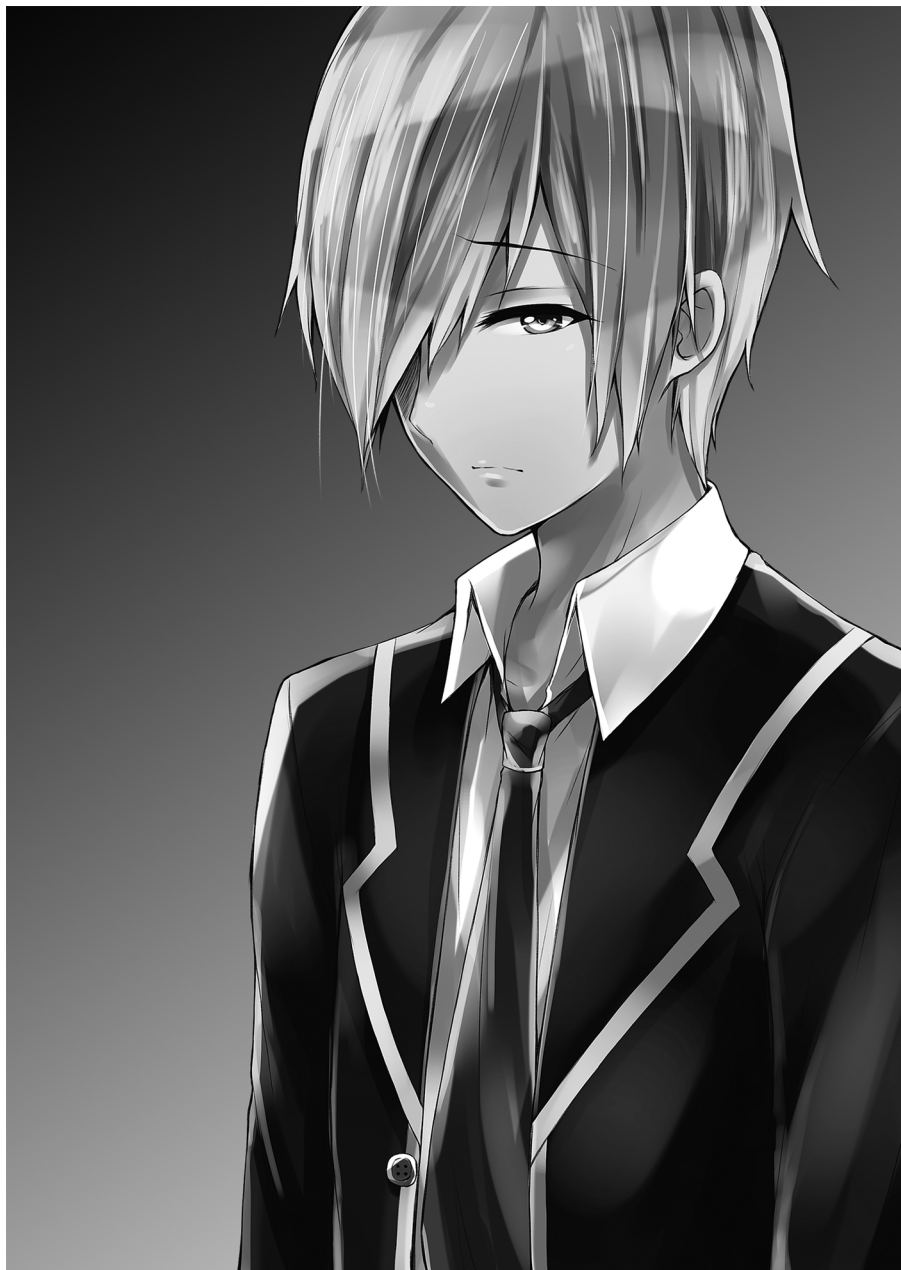
“What did you mean by that?”

I had been stuck on those words ever since he said them.

“What are you even saying? Nothing has changed at all.”

That was what Kudou muttered after hearing Juumonji’s grumbling. After I got thrown into this world, many things about my life changed, and I lost many things too. Coming to this fortress made me realize that more than I wanted to. So, I was curious how Kudou could make such a claim.

“...Oh, that? I was only talking to myself,” Kudou said. He forced a smile, but he looked resigned. “I didn’t mean much by it. The strong simply act however they like. We got sent to a different world, but that part remained exactly the same as before. That’s all I was thinking.”



For Kudou, who was basically a henchman or manservant for Sakagami, a new environment didn't really change anything. Up until now, I had only focused on all the things I'd lost. That didn't mean the things that remained the same were necessarily good things, though. There were facets of what Kudou was saying that I hadn't thought of before.

"Sorry for saying something so strange. If that's all, then please excuse me."

Kudou slightly bowed his head and then finally left us behind. I watched his back as Lily leaned against me.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"It's nothing."

I shook my head. It wasn't serious. There was just a part of me that agreed with what he'd said.

"The strong simply act however they want. We got sent to a different world, but that part remained exactly the same as before."

The world we came from had a system of personal laws that maintained society's public order through morals, ethics, and a sense of justice. Those laws were supported by the organizations that maintained public order. Take the police, for example, or in a more extreme case, the military. However, there was no such deterrent in the Woodlands. As a result, a portion of those with power acted as they liked, bringing about the Colony's destruction.

In that case, perhaps nothing had drastically changed by coming here. Back in our world, in the dense forest, and here in this fortress, human nature remained the same. All it meant was an even stronger power determined the rules. If so...

"Master?" Lily said, bringing me back from my thoughts.

"We should get back to our room. Kei should be there soon."

"...Oh, right. It's about time, huh?"

A fair amount of time had passed because we'd had breakfast with Miyoshi's group. At this rate, we would end up making Kei wait in the hallway. Thus, I walked side by side with Lily at a slightly hurried pace to get back.



We ended up getting back just as Kei arrived.

"Good morning."

The girl with the same blonde hair and blue eyes as Shiran bobbed her head as she greeted us energetically. She was with the knight Mikihiko had mentioned to us. He looked somewhat familiar. I scrutinized him further and recognized him as the man Shiran talked to while we were in the Alliance Knights' office the other day. His

name was Marcus.

After Marcus left Kei with us, we entered our room. What followed was class time. Although, the one playing the role of teacher wasn't either of the older kids present, but the still childish Kei. She spread out several books on the small table and began teaching us about the monsters of this world.

"From what Shiran told us last time, all of the monsters come from the Woodlands. So, does that mean there aren't many strong monsters outside the Woodlands?" I asked.

"That's fundamentally true, but there are exceptions."

Kei tightly clenched her fists atop her knees and leaned forward, doing her best to answer me. It highlighted how enthusiastic she was, which was very endearing. A thin chain carrying a red runestone about the size of a fingertip hung from her neck. This was a translation runestone.

"By the efforts of the great saviors throughout history, we've managed to clear our way through the Woodlands. Be that as it may, even in the lands that have been cleared, there are scraps of the Woodlands left behind. We call these the Dark Woods. It's often the case that powerful monsters who can't be easily defeated by any normal means set up their nests in such places. To be rid of these forests would require the resolve to suffer great casualties. The Rage of the Lands is a famous example."

"I see. Meaning there's a major reason to leave behind pieces of the cleared Woodlands."

"Yes. Conversely, those monsters who don't have a habit of settling are treated as disasters when outside the Woodlands. Unlike the ones in the Dark Woods, these inflict serious casualties when left at large. Many of them were suppressed by the esteemed saviors of the past."

"So, that's also one of their jobs."

"That's how it ended up. As for other cases, there's one legend that tells of a monster that dominated a small country. Oh, but this is considered apocryphal by the church and isn't acknowledged as fact."

"It's not?"

The church Kei mentioned was the Holy Church, which treated visitors from other worlds as objects of their faith. Pretty much every village had a church in it where they spread the legends of the saviors. What did it mean for such a church to dismiss one such legend? I cocked my head curiously.

"I mean, a monster possessing the intellect to dominate a country is impossible," Kei said.

"...Well, that's true."

I could see Lily, who was sitting on the bed, giggling from the

corner of my eye.

“It was apparently even turned into a play held in the imperial capital some time in the past. *The Tragedy of the Undead King Carl*. It’s a story of the king of a country that excelled in magic. The death of his lover, one of the great saviors, drove him mad. In the end, he turned into an undead monster called a lich.”

I had encountered another type of undead monster before: ghouls. A group of Alliance Knights moving separately from Shiran’s group during their rescue operation in the Depths were annihilated by monsters. Those knights had turned into undead monsters.

Ghoul outbreaks were dependent on the density of mana in the area. For example, corpses often turned into ghouls on battlefields littered with the dead. The soul contained mana, so when many lives were scattered to the wind in one place, the density of mana in the area was amplified. The Woodlands was a special region rich with mana to begin with, so ghouls outbreaks were a frequent occurrence.

“Liches are essentially the same as ghouls in that they’re undead monsters. However, it’s said that they’re powerful monsters who, though imperfect, are nearly immortal and can freely use magic.”

“So, it’s something like a high-class ghoul?” I asked.

“Something like that. It’s said that the Undead King Carl used his relentless willpower to maintain his intelligence. For a long time, nobody was able to defeat him. But finally, members of the Holy Order who once served under his lover were dispatched, and the Undead King vanished into the flames of purification.”

“So this Undead King is already dead?”

“Teehee. It’s just a fairy tale, Takahiro. The church teaches that the mad king led his country in open revolt against the Empire. This happened several centuries ago, so naturally, he’s long dead.”

“I see.”

I tossed in an appropriate response and sighed in a way that Kei wouldn’t notice.

That’s unfortunate... I thought to myself. I had a reason for asking Kei about such a famous monster. By stepping foot into the human world, we were distancing ourselves from the world of monsters. That meant it would be difficult for me to reinforce our combat strength. On the other hand, we could gather information much easier in the human world, a definite advantage for being here.

By learning everything I could about powerful monsters, perhaps I could encounter rare or high monsters who could potentially become my servants. Kei didn’t seem to believe it, but from what she told me about the Undead King, it hinted at the existence of monsters who were self-aware without me being a factor. I was rather intrigued by this.

But even without such a motive, just learning about monsters was meaningful in the event we encountered them. The knights were particularly well informed about the monsters in the Fringes, where the fortress was located, so this information was very valuable. The Fringes was actually quite a large region with many locales, each with monsters I had never seen before. It was all very interesting to me. Plus, I got to hear about another amusing story.

“There’s a famous monster here in the northern Woodlands, too. Stories from five hundred years ago tell of the Great White Spider. I don’t know whether or not they’re true, but there’s an arachne described as so beautiful you wouldn’t think it came from this world. It shows up in the heroic tales of the saviors.”

I almost spat out the tea I had just taken a sip of.

“A-A white arachne...?”

“Oh. Does it interest you? During the retreat of the campaign into the Abyss five hundred years ago, the Great White Spider was one among the monsters who attacked the exhausted army. The savior who led them was already dying from a fatal wound, but a heroic battle still unfolded between them. Their duel ended with no victor. It’s possible the Great White Spider may still be wandering the Woodlands to this very day.”

I mean, she’s actually supposed to be quite close to the fortress right now... Not that I could possibly mention this. Even if this was from before she had an ego, Gerbera apparently had a mischievous past. She told me before about how she encountered a human army, but she didn’t say anything about an epic battle against their leader.

In any case, our time with Kei was educational and enjoyable. We took our lunch together, and our classes continued into the afternoon until Shiran returned from her patrol duty and paid us a visit. Shiran was going to teach us swordsmanship today as well.

“Sorry for asking you to use your free time on us,” I said.

“Don’t be. It was my offer to begin with. Besides, I’ve told you this before, but I don’t really have anything to do aside from training. You’re rather enthusiastic about it, Takahiro, so there’s worth in teaching you too.”

“You’re a good teacher. It’d be a waste if I didn’t take it seriously.”

“I-I don’t believe that to be the case...”

Shiran averted her blue eyes while touching her pointy ear. Her innocent show of shyness brought a smile to my face as I decided to add an additional request.

“But I feel like you’re being a little too considerate. You can be a little stricter, if you want.”

“...I fear you’ll get injured if I were to be any stricter.”

“Sometimes getting stronger means going through some pain. I

won't complain just because of some broken bones. They can be healed with magic, anyway. Please be as tough as you want. There's no meaning otherwise."

"I-I see. You did keep going until you reached the very limits of your stamina yesterday, so I don't doubt that you're being serious..."

Shiran's voice sounded a little astonished, but I also sensed a favorable sentiment toward my attitude.

"If you're done talking, then let's get going, Takahiro!" Seeing that our conversation had come to an end, Kei rushed over and grabbed my hand. "I'll be receiving lessons from Shiran today too. Let's do our best!"

Kei pulled my hand as if to say she couldn't wait a moment longer. Shiran scowled, her expression troubled, as she looked over the little girl.

"Kei. You're acting a little too familiar with Takahiro..."

"Now, now, Shiran. It's fine, isn't it?" Lily said, trying to smooth things over. "Majima has a little brother, but no little sister. He's happy to have a cute girl like Kei so attached to him."

"Still..." Shiran watched her niece tightly grasp my hand. Then her expression relaxed and she smiled. "...Very well. My apologies, Takahiro, please take care of Kei."

"Yay!" Kei cheered, bringing a smile to everyone's faces.

"I suppose there's no helping it," Shiran said with an affectionate gaze.

It was such a peaceful scene one wouldn't think we were in the middle of a forest rampant with monsters. I continued to look at Shiran's profile as I recalled what she told me in the mausoleum.

"Even if I may never see it again with my own eyes, I want to protect my hometown. I want to protect the other villages that share the circumstances of my countrymen. I want to protect the comrades who fight by my side."

This kind of scene was surely what Shiran wanted to protect. Right here and now, I could feel it on my skin.



Shiran went ahead of us to get the room ready while Lily and I kept Kei company. We couldn't afford to leave her on her own. Kei got some damp cloths and water flasks ready, and we headed over to the training ground where Shiran was waiting for us. Lily and I carried most of the luggage aside from the large leather bag in Kei's hands. Inside was her leather armor and other kinds of equipment used for her own training. The young girl's steps were lively, as if even that weight was pleasant to her.

Incidentally, I gave Mikihiko a call. He wanted to participate in

Shiran's lessons too, and he was going to join us later. We walked down the hallways as Kei cheerfully told us about what she'd learned from Shiran already.

"...?"

When we arrived at the appointed room, which was large enough for several people to move around in at once, I felt the strained atmosphere at the tip of my nose and came to a stop. A fully armored girl was standing there, her dignified profile on display, with a sword at the ready in her right hand and a large shield in her left.

She suddenly exhaled and stepped forward. Despite the heavy armor, her movements were sharp, as if gliding across the ground. I couldn't even tell when she raised her sword until I saw her swing it down diagonally. Her sword twirled back, the tip changing directions and going above her head in a reverse slash. Next was a horizontal swipe into a thrust. Her movements were so light one wouldn't believe she was manipulating a large mass of steel as countless strikes flashed through the air.

The execution of her strikes wasn't all that fast, perhaps so she could confirm the minute details of her own movements. Yet the way she carried her sword made it extremely difficult to chase the blade with my eyes. Her actions were far too smooth, not a single hint of waste. This wasn't a common sight. This was something she had acquired through blood-curdling devotion to her studies and life-threatening combat experience. It was as if this girl before my eyes existed precisely for the sake of swinging a sword, as if she and her blade were a single entity.

She had shown me examples of how to swing a sword when teaching me before, but this was my first time seeing her training like this. If this was the norm for the knights who fought on the frontlines of the Woodlands, were the cheats we visitors possessed really all that impressive...?

"...That's amazing," I said, suddenly exhaling.

"Isn't it?" Kei agreed happily. "She can use more than just a sword, too. She's also a very talented spiritualist." Kei's voice was overflowing with respect for the girl she idolized as an older sister. "Contracting with spirits is a special type of magic only permitted to the elves. However, even among elves, only a small fraction of talented spiritualists can form a contract. The spirits test their contractors. All who accept this challenge are only met with success or death."

"Meaning there's a requirement to surpass these trials?"

"Yes. The spirits require a noble soul. Also, it's said they need a very pure prayer. That's why we elves go through strict training from a young age. Even so, very few dare to take on the challenge of

making a contract.”

“So, elves go that far to make these contracts, huh?”

I shifted my focus to the yellow being floating above Shiran as she swung her sword. The spirit, who looked like a clay sphere with little limbs sticking out of it, had long, green garments hanging over it. As always, it drifted about the air in a happy-go-lucky manner.

“That’s right. The spirits are really special to us, after all.”

The elves were ostracized because spirits were considered monsters, enemies of humanity. That made the ones who contracted with them traitors, putting them on the receiving end of much criticism. Nevertheless, the elves never cast away the spirits. That was how special they were.

“What’s more, spirits are always helping their contractor during battles of life and death.”

“Hmm. I was under the impression it was just essential for detecting enemies.”

The sprite contracted to Shiran spotted me when I was hiding in the forest. I brought it up because of my prior experience with this, but Kei shook her head.

“They help in such ways, but that’s not all. A spirit will support its contractor with magic during battle. For example, the sprite always with Shiran will use earth magic during battle and also amplify her physical abilities. By borrowing a spirit’s power in such a way, spiritualists can do the job of two talented mages at once.”

“Hmm. That’s amazing.”

“Yup, it really is. I also want to be like that one day...” Kei’s eyes sparkled as she tightly held the leather bag in her arms to her chest. “Also! Also! That’s not the only thing amazing about Shiran!”

“Don’t go praising me to the heavens, Kei.”

Shiran suddenly brought her sword to a stop and turned this way. She looked to be intensely focused on her training, but she had realized we were present. Well, that much was natural considering how much of a racket we were making.

“Y-You were listening?!” Kei shrieked.

“I could hear you quite clearly. You must take care in retaining your composure.” Shiran sheathed her sword and walked toward us. She then held up her finger in front of the panicking Kei.

“Furthermore, you’ll be a squire next year, Kei. You’re well on your way to becoming a knight. I’m still a novice halfway down my path. You must set your goals higher than that.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

“I promised to watch over your training today too, didn’t I? Please get ready.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Shiran was now in complete lecturing mode. Kei energetically ran into the room in accordance with Shiran's instructions. She opened her leather bag and began pulling out its contents. Lily followed her, and the two of them had a friendly chat while getting ready. Seeing that Shiran was now walking my way, I struck up a conversation with her.

"There's no need to be so strict with her, is there?"

"I have the responsibility of raising that girl into a full-fledged adult," Shiran replied, lowering her voice so that Kei couldn't hear. "If not, I couldn't possibly face my late brother and his wife, or my mother who always worries for her."

Shiran acted as an older sister, regardless of their actual relationship. Thinking back on it, the way Gerbera cared for Ayame was somewhat similar. Gerbera was a bit more of a softie, though.

"But from what I can tell, Kei is actually quite capable in both swordsmanship and magic for her age, isn't she? She can even use a translation runestone."

Even during the incident with Sakagami yesterday, if not for her social standing preventing her from resisting, and if not for the fear and confusion of being approached by an older boy, she might've been able to get by without my help. I thought it was pretty impressive for her age.

But Shiran shook her head. "She still requires a great deal of diligent study to be able to fight to the bitter end here in the Woodlands. Besides, she has trouble maintaining presence of mind and can be rather careless. I can't take my eyes off her."

"You mean that just now? She just wanted to tell someone about the big sister she's so proud of. Isn't that a good thing?"

She probably didn't have many opportunities to do so. Shiran and Kei were both elves; the only ones she could talk to like this were her close relatives. It was rare she could boast about her sister to outsiders like Lily and me.

"On that note, your skills are really amazing, Shiran. Watching you made me understand Kei's desire to brag."

"That's not true," Shiran objected, despite my serious tone. "This much isn't all that impressive." I thought she was just being humble, but there was a tranquil air to her expression. She was being genuine. "I am of course striving to do everything I can... But it never seems to be enough."

The tranquil expression remained on Shiran's face, but there was a gloominess to her voice now.



“It just isn’t enough. No matter how much I train my body, I’m unable to protect my comrades as they die one after the other.”

“Shiran...”

Her gloomy eyes reminisced over the brother she’d lost in the Woodlands, along with all the other comrades who’d died in battle before now.

“We’re capable of far too little. Every year, villages vanish, people are devoured, and the forest gradually encroaches on the world. Even with swords in hand, staking our lives in battle, it takes everything we have to stave off complete destruction. All we can do is face a hopeless defensive battle built on a mountain of sacrifices.” Shiran clenched her fist as the sound of tightening leather rang out. “That’s why...” Suddenly, her blue eyes focused on me—no, not me, on the saviors of this world. “...Takahiro, do you know the major difference between us and the great saviors?”

“Is there one?” I asked with knit brows.

“Yes. The big difference between us and visitors from other worlds is said to be in our souls. The power in your souls gives birth to tremendous abilities, so they say. The true essence of a person lies not in their body, but their soul. We differ from saviors in terms of our very essence.”

That’s not true... I thought to myself. If there was in fact a difference, it was simply that we were born in different worlds. That was my opinion, but I wasn’t so thoughtless as to say it aloud. Shiran’s quiet words had a peculiar weight to them.

After trying, and trying, and trying, and trying so hard...she still couldn’t reach such heights. She greatly envied what she couldn’t obtain. Those thoughts transformed the fabricated image of the saviors into religious idols in her eyes. That was what I believed. I felt it from Shiran’s behavior, as well as that of the other students.

For example, in the legends Shiran spoke of before, the saviors who descended upon this world all threw themselves into battle to save the suffering masses. There wasn’t a single exception. “Knowing what is right and not doing it is a want of courage,” so they said. A truly wonderful ideal. Such an ideal was too clear cut, however. Humans weren’t that perfect. The phrase “several men, several minds” didn’t always have good connotations. It was impossible for every single human thrown into this world to be such benevolent saints. We wouldn’t need the police if that were the case.

The legends of the saviors were far too clean. They were born of alterations to history and embellished tales. That was why I called their view of saviors a fabricated image. Nonetheless, one couldn’t say this was unconditionally a bad thing. Sometimes it was necessary to

have something clean and pretty over the mud-smeared truth.

“The first savior once said, ‘This world is where wishes come true,’” Shiran continued, her voice filled with passion. “Those words were very simple, so there are many interpretations. The mainstream belief is that in this dark era where humanity is pushed to the brink, the savior left those words behind to encourage the people not to lose hope. I have also received their encouragement.”

“...”

All I could hear from this was, “I was a totally powerless and ordinary guy, but after coming here, I became a hero right out of my dreams.” Not that I could tell her that. It was clear that this illusion was something necessary to Shiran. I wasn’t so insensitive that I would shatter it.

“In just a few more years, Kei will join the battlefield. Thinking of the casualty rate among knights, she isn’t likely to ever return to our village alive. Besides, even if some circumstance brings her back, we still won’t know when the forest will swallow that village. Moreover, I won’t be able to do a thing about it. I cannot possibly bring an end to this eternal battle that has raged for thousands of years before she joins the fray...”

Shiran looked at her niece putting on her leather gear with a sorrowful gaze.

“I’m powerless, unable to do anything about the reality before me... However, hope has swooped down upon us.” Her blue eyes turned my way and she smiled radiantly. “There is no precedent for so many visitors to descend upon this world at once. Just maybe, this generation will be the one where we are released from the menace that has threatened us for so, so long.”

“...”

A thought came to mind as I looked at her smile. *This might be hopeless...* I had one thing I wanted to talk about with Shiran. It was about finding someone who could help us, as I had discussed with Lily.

“We ask for help after explaining a certain amount of our circumstances. We can just withhold the other stuff. For example, we want to leave the fortress, but we don’t want other people to know. We can mention that much, right?”

Right up until yesterday, I couldn’t trust a single person in this fortress. I hid absolutely everything about myself and tried to fulfill my objective. But Lily said that was no good. As their master, I decided to look for someone I could trust and ask for their cooperation. Albeit, this wasn’t just a matter of finding someone I didn’t think would betray us. I had to choose someone who knew of the circumstances of this world. Otherwise, I would just cause them

trouble. The first person that came to mind was Shiran.

I had a pretty good grasp of her disposition from our interactions. I thought it might be okay to go to her for advice, just like Lily said. However, if Shiran's perception of me was nothing more than one of these "fabricated saviors," then I couldn't possibly tell her I wanted to leave the fortress without anyone knowing. That would be the same as shattering her precious illusion.

It's unfortunate, but I'll have to look for someone else.

As I came to that conclusion, Shiran suddenly withdrew her smile.

"But I've come to think now... Maybe this is just my selfish hope."

"Shiran...?"

"I was taught the great saviors who descend upon us from afar are gallant heroes who fight to save the world. If I just clench my teeth and endure, then one day, they'll come to save us all. I don't intend to deny I fought with such hopes in mind. However..." I was bewildered by her unexpected words as Shiran looked at me with a sincere gaze. "Back when we spoke in the mausoleum, you told me you could understand my feelings of wanting to protect my hometown, my people, and my comrades."

"...Yeah, I did."

"I can tell you weren't lying by watching how you swing your sword. Takahiro, you aren't trying to protect this world like the great saviors from the stories... I feel that you are desperately devoting everything you have to protect something dear to you. I don't mind if you laugh this off as me being conceited, but I believe you are the same as me."

Shiran was empathetic toward someone who harbored the same feelings she did. I felt the same way about Shiran down in the mausoleum. Back then, she felt that in me as well.

"If this is true, then the hopes I pinned on you were nothing more than a selfish illusion."

"...You're not angry? I betrayed your hopes, didn't I?"

"Getting angry over the betrayal of a hope I pushed on you arbitrarily is far too insincere, don't you think? On the contrary, I should apologize to you, Takahiro. Please forgive me for projecting such a selfish illusion on you."

Shiran's eyes were looking right at me in the here and now.

"I'm ready! Huh? Shiran? Takahiro? What's the matter?"

Kei finished putting on her leather armor and came running over. She looked at each of us with a curious expression. Lily sensed something was going on, so she placed her hand on Kei's shoulder to stop her.

"Shiran, I..."

I resolved myself and opened my mouth, hanging on to my next

words. Shiran waited for me...but her complexion suddenly changed.

“Hm?! Please wait, Takahiro.”

She looked straight up in the air at the spirit emitting a flashing yellow light. It spun in circles in a fluster as its tiny limbs flailed about. I felt déjà vu. It was the same scene I saw right before the bull wriggler attack in front of Fort Tilia.

“Monsters?”

“Yes. It seems they’re close to the fortress.” Shiran looked at me standing there tensely and gave me a reliable smile. “There’s no need to worry. Monster attacks are an everyday occurrence here. We have already finished our patrols for the day and there were no abnormalities, so this is likely an attack by highly mobile monsters, something like one or two tripdrills. It happens all the time. It’s nothing serious.” Shiran then walked past me and stepped into the hallway. “The others probably haven’t noticed yet. I’ll go inform them. I shall return once we are sure they have been repulsed, so let’s continue our conversation then.”

“Sure,” I said with a nod.

Shiran gave me a refreshing smile. “I can respect you for devoting everything you have for the sake of something dear to you. Even if you weren’t a savior, I look forward to when we can speak again.”



“Yoohooo! I’m here!” Mikihiko yelled right after Shiran left. “I just passed Lieutenant Shiran earlier. Seems like something urgent came up?”

“She said monsters showed up and had to go. Does this happen often?”

“Ooh, that. Yup. Happens all the time. It’s pretty much guaranteed once every three days or so. In most cases, she’s the first to notice, so there’s not much of a point in having the army’s sentries around. She’s like a high-efficiency radar.”

“That makes sense.”

In truth, considering how she couldn’t detect Ayame and Asarina in hiding, I knew Shiran’s spirit only told her when *enemies* were nearby. It was a little different from a radar. Regardless, it was a splendid means of detection. Judging from what Mikihiko said, this ability of hers was quite valued in the fortress.

“I think the Alliance Knights are probably going to be deployed to exterminate the approaching monsters,” Kei said as she loosened up her lithe body and looked up at us.

“Isn’t the defense of the fortress the army’s job?”

Fort Tilia was garrisoned by the Southern Imperial Army, the Second Company of the Imperial Knights, and the Third Company of

the Alliance Knights—the latter being dispatched by one of the Empire’s vassal states. The army managed the fortress’s defenses while the knights suppressed the monsters in the Woodlands. I had heard this was how their duties were segregated.

“Of course, the army will take up defensive positions, but those people are pretty much turtles,” Kei answered.

“So they don’t go into the forest.”

“Exactly. On the rare occasions monsters slip through and make it all the way to the fortress, they complain to the knights, even though defending the fortress is their job! Isn’t that cruel?!”

“Well, you could tell them that if they wanna complain then they should just go and do it themselves,” Mikihiko said with a strained smile. “Although, if you do, they’re probably gonna start complaining about the forest being under the knights’ jurisdiction.”

“...Sounds like a real pain,” I said.

“That’s how organizations go.” Mikihiko shrugged then snapped his fingers. “Oh yeah. Hey Takahiro, since it’s going down and all, why don’t we go have a look?”

“Have a look at what...? You mean the knights repelling the monsters?”

“Yup. You’re interested too, yeah?”

“...I guess.”

It was actually quite an attractive proposition. Seeing experienced knights who had gone through proper training take part in battle would be a good reference.

“But is it that easy to go and take a look?”

“It’ll be fine so long as you don’t say something stupid like you wanna go down with them to get all up close and personal. Actually, I guess if you insist, they’ll let you do that too... But you don’t wanna trouble little Kei here by dragging her into a battle and making her cry, do you now?”

“I won’t cry!”

“Are you fine with watching?” Mikihiko didn’t actually want to make her cry himself, so he asked to be sure. After Kei gave him a quick nod, he moved things along. “Then let’s go to the southern observation tower. We can see about half of the fortress’s surroundings from there.”

With that, we went along with Mikihiko’s proposal and got moving. There was more hustle and bustle in the fortress than usual. They were preparing to deal with the monsters. We talked to a few soldiers and managed to get permission before arriving at a spiral staircase which led to the top of a tower.

“Oh yeah, Takahiro,” Mikihiko said halfway up the staircase, turning around with a cheerful tone. “I heard you made little Kei here

your mistress. That true?"

"M-Miss—?!"

I wasn't the one to react to this. It was Kei. She stumbled on the steps and nearly fell over. On the other hand, I merely knit my brows a little. Unfortunately, I'd known this guy for a long time already, so I was used to Mikihiko saying stupid crap by now.

"Also, you've laid your hands on Shiran, so I hear."

"Wh-Who is saying such things, sir?!"

"I guess pretty much all the students know... Well, I'm the one spreading it around."

"M-Mikihiko?!"

Kei began cutely wailing on Mikihiko's shoulders. She had completely forgotten he was a savior. Shiran would definitely criticize her if she were here, but Mikihiko laughed it off like he was having a blast. His face was that of a criminal taking delight in his own crimes. He wasn't just being thoughtless, though. Spreading such rumors did in fact make it safer for the two of them. Now I understood. The strange behavior of Miyoshi's group during breakfast was because of this.

I had one or two complaints, like he just assumed I would approve, and that the exploration team would probably make a fuss once they found out, but Mikihiko was just trying to protect them in his own way.

We reached the top of the tower as we continued to chat. There were several soldiers in the room keeping a vigilant watch on the outside through large, open windows.

"Oh, Mikihiko? What brings you here, sir?"

"We just came to take a look. They're with me," Mikihiko said, apparently acquainted with the soldier. "I heard monsters showed up. Where are they?"

"We can't see them yet. The knights are just about to sally out."

"Okay. So to the front."

Mikihiko walked up to one of the windows. From above, Fort Tilia was like a large polygon. This tower was set where two of the walls met. Looking out the windows installed on the circular wall, we could see the glittering light from the fortress's iron gate. Wind blew through the window, carrying the scent of the forest.

"...Hm?" Lily muttered, sniffing at the air and knitting her brows.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. Maybe I'm just imagining things. Just now, it felt like..."

"Oh! There they are!" Mikihiko shouted, cutting Lily off.

Looking closer, the iron gates were opening. Around twenty fully armored knights marched out of the fortress. They looked to be part of

the Alliance Knights, but I couldn't see Shiran's white helmet in the crowd. A row of soldiers armed with bows stood on the ramparts above the gate.

The drawbridge was lowered over the moat surrounding the fortress and the knights marched across. When the last knight finished crossing, they all came to a sudden stop. I wondered whether something had happened when Lily tugged on my clothes.

"Th-This is bad."

"What...?"

Just as I was about to ask what was going on, I held my tongue. I could also hear the noise now. The earth was rumbling far away, and the sound was gradually getting closer. The forest was trembling. Something was coming. The moment that thought flashed through my mind, a tidal wave of green poured out of the trees.

"Wha—?!"

It was an army of three-meter-tall bugs, bull wrigglers. Not just ten or twenty of them either; there were easily over a hundred surging out of the forest. They encroached on the open land surrounding the fortress like a surging wave, kicking up vast clouds of dust behind them.

"Th-The hell is that?!"

"You're kidding, right? Am I having a bad dream...?"

"Wh-Why are there so many...? H-Hey, this is bad! They have to get the drawbridge up quickly!"

The soldiers in the tower were astir. Their reaction told me this was an abnormal situation. Panic delayed everyone's response. The drawbridge finally started to rise as arrows coupled with magic fire poured down from the ramparts. The path before the bull wrigglers turned into a field of death abound with iron and flames.

However, this would only be a field of death for weak humans. The surging wave of monsters couldn't be stopped by such superficial means. Arrows plunged into meat. Carapaces burned. But that wasn't enough to slow down these tenacious bull wrigglers, let alone kill them.

The fortress's defenses were built under the assumption that their overwhelming numbers would take on a few monsters at a time. With their attacks spread so thinly across the green tide, it was clear the defenses would be less effective.

The vanguard of the bull wrigglers finally reached the drawbridge. The knights stood before them, no longer able to return to the relative safety of the fortress by crossing the moat. Even if they could return, they chose to defend that spot to the death.

The moat surrounding the fortress was deep, but it wasn't enough to stop the monster invasion. It was nothing but a means to slow them

down to begin with. Still, anyone could tell that such stalling tactics were essential in a siege. Enemies crawling through the moat made easy targets, giving the advantage to the defending side.

If the drawbridge was taken, however, the tactic would lose its effectiveness. That was why they couldn't possibly afford to yield their position. The leader's decision wasn't wrong.

I could hear his sharp command all the way from the tower.

"Third Company! Charge!"

Even fully clad in sturdy armor, the twenty knights looked ever so tiny as they charged into the bugs. And in just a few seconds, they were swallowed by the green tide.

"Nooo!"

Kei screamed and covered her mouth. The knights were no longer visible within the mass of green bodies and dust. Their noble sacrifice bought just a few seconds. But those few seconds were priceless. That was enough time to raise the drawbridge, after all.

Well, it was supposed to be, at least. So why did the drawbridge stop halfway up? The bull wrigglers leaped into the air toward the half-raised drawbridge. Several of them fell into the moat, but many managed to make it.

"Hey! No way! Come on! You're shitting me, right?! Cut it out! Hey! Stop!" Mikihiko yelled stiffly.

We watched as more and more bugs clung to the bridge, slowly causing it to sway...when suddenly, it could no longer withstand the weight and crashed down. The path was open. There was nobody left to block them. The large army of caterpillars charged across the bridge toward the iron gate. And without slowing, they crashed into it. The fortress shook with a thunderous roar.

"Whoa!"

Green body fluids scattered in the air. One after the other, like lemmings throwing themselves off a cliff, or like moths to a flame, they showed no hesitation in slamming their bodies against the iron gate.

As they did, their heads caved in, crumbled, and scattered into the air. They were dying. It was as if this was some competition. Their nauseating behavior somehow reminded me of ghouls. I couldn't sense even the smallest attachment to life that any living being should possess.

They relentlessly slammed into the fortress, their furious attacks enough to pulverize their own bodies. The first wave caused a creak. The second a tremble. The third, fourth, and fifth opened a crack in the gates. The iron doors shook, lurched, and wrenched open. The green tide surged through the open gate all at once.

"The monsters...got through...?"

Someone's dumbfounded voice struck my earlobe. I was probably in a stupor for less time than most of the people in the room. That was why I was able to notice Lily, who was right by my side, suddenly stiffen.

"Oh no! They're coming this way!"

I brought my gaze up from the gate and spotted a flock of flying bullets: seventy-centimeter-large insects, stab beetles. In the next instant, the top floor of the observation tower we were in collapsed.

Chapter 2: Secret

I peeled my gaze from the scene unfolding in front of the iron gate, only to see a swarm of giant beetles charging right at us. The moment I realized this, I jumped away from the window. The ability to make a judgment and react in an instant was something that naturally came to me after living in the Woodlands. There were just far too many to intercept them in time. Once I determined this, I strengthened my body with mana and jumped back with all my strength.

At the same time, I grabbed Mikihiko's collar and scooped Kei up in my arm. This was the best I could do. I couldn't reach anyone else. Lily acted in sync with me and added her own jumping power to mine, still clinging on to me. We were aiming for the wooden door leading to the spiral staircase.

The living winged bullets crashed into the top floor of the observation tower. It all happened in an instant.

"Aaargh?!"

A stab beetle pierced a soldier who had been staring fixedly at the gates. He screamed in agony as the beetle continued charging, smashing into the wall with the soldier still impaled on its horn. The soldier vomited the entire contents of his stomach and promptly died.

The beetles weren't only coming through the window, either. Crashes resounded all over as fissures ran down the walls, cracking them to pieces as more and more flying bullets slammed into the tower. The sound of buzzing wings zipping right by me sent shivers running down my back. We would've been impaled just now if we hadn't moved. Several of the soldiers weren't so lucky, though. The stab beetles mowed them down as their screams filled the air.

"Urgh...?!"

In those few seconds where I felt like I was on the precipice of death, I managed to break through the door with my back. I choked from the impact rippling through the shield I had slung over my shoulder, but I managed to maintain consciousness thanks to the mana flowing through me. Unfortunately, this also meant I had to watch their agonizing deaths until the very end.

In the span of just a few seconds, the wall crumbled under the mass of stab beetles. Not only that, the giant insects kept going and crashed incessantly against the opposing wall. It was the exact same

scene as the one happening at the front gates. They didn't pay any heed to their own survival as they kamikazed straight in. The opposing wall cracked, fissures ran down its entire length, and it finally collapsed. The remaining walls weren't enough to support the ceiling anymore. It creaked, bent, warped, and fell. Pulled down by gravity, man and monster alike were crushed as the observation post at the top of the tower collapsed.



I tumbled down the spiral staircase. After toppling over two or three times, I crashed into the curved wall and came to a stop as I grumbled in pain. I fell with a significant amount of force, so my body hurt all over. If Lily hadn't cradled my head, I would've likely suffered a concussion.

"...Are you hurt, Kei?" I asked.

"I-I'm fine."

I sat up and checked on the girl pressed against my chest. She didn't appear to be injured. A sense of relief washed over me as I looked up the staircase.

"...They didn't make it."

The door at the top was buried in rubble. It was enough to tell me nothing could be done for them anymore.

"How about you, Mikihiko?"

I stood Kei up and checked on the one other person I managed to save.

"Just a bunch of scratches and bruises. It seriously hurts. I wanna cry... But I'm alive and kicking, so that's wonderful at least."

Mikihiko held his right shoulder and got to his feet. In contrast to his frivolous tone, his expression was filled with grief as he looked up the staircase.

"Sorry," I said, casting my gaze to the floor, "I couldn't save anyone else."

"It's fine. It all happened in an instant. I didn't even know what's what, but here I am well and alive. That's all 'cause of you, right? Thanks, man. I can't die until I win over the commander."

He didn't seem to notice that we'd managed to make our emergency escape because of Lily. This was likely because I'd grabbed him by the back of the collar and forced him to move on the spur of the moment.

Mikihiko turned to Lily and smiled at her, doing his best to put on a show of courage. "Glad to see you safe and sound too, Mizushima."

"Mhm. But what do we do now? We can't just stay here." Lily took her wooden spear and shield off her back and lowered her gaze toward me.

“...Let’s get moving for now. The tower could collapse at any moment.”

I also took my shield off my back and drew the wooden sword at my waist. I was really glad we hadn’t disarmed ourselves after entering the fortress. We had no way of knowing what awaited us next. Our weapons were camouflaged to look like normal magical puppet weapons thanks to Rose, but we couldn’t remove these while other people were watching. Having said that, we did have to consider the worst-case scenario.

Seeing us get ready for battle, Mikihiko also hardened his resolve. He drew two of the four swords at his waist and handed one of the spares to Kei, who wasn’t carrying any weapons with her.

“Right. Let’s go,” I said.

We began descending the staircase. Lily casually ran half a step ahead of me and gave me a glance from the side.

“What do we do after this? We can’t just run around aimlessly.”

“You’ve got a point there...”

Just as I was about to answer, a sudden gust of wind brushed against my face and I came to a stop. I squinted and took a closer look. One of the stab beetles from earlier had apparently gone astray and crashed into the wall of the spiral staircase, opening a hole and letting in air from the outside.

We looked down at the fortress through the hole and all gasped in unison. The first defensive line, which was meant to hold monsters at bay from the ramparts, was in complete chaos. A firefang spat fire, setting several soldiers ablaze and sending them tumbling off the wall. A rough rabbit rammed into a soldier’s armor, breaking all the bones in his body with its powerful arm. Bull wrigglers trampled over the dead and injured without pause. Slimes grabbed their poor victims with their feelers and suffocated them to death. There were even monsters I’d never seen before swooping down on the soldiers as they desperately tried to resist.

Other monsters had apparently charged into the fortress after the bull wrigglers tore down the gate. This was when we first learned that the bull wrigglers were nothing more than the vanguard of this invasion.

Larger monsters like treants didn’t enter the fortress, instead loitering outside the walls, but the large majority of monsters were already inside. Monsters were pouring out of the door to the top of the ramparts one after the other. The beasts exceeded what any soldier was capable of both in terms of speed and strength. The soldiers were trying to surround the monsters and fight them off, but there were far too many enemies to accomplish that. Spread out as they were, the oncoming herd crushed them one by one. Those who tried to take up

formation and attack in unison were merely killed in groups.

Fort Tilia was built in the shape of two polygons, one within the other. The inner walls were even taller than the outer ones, so even with the monsters on top of the outer walls, soldiers could still launch attacks from above. However, the majority of the fortress's soldiers were on the outer walls to repel the attackers, so the few soldiers on the inner ones suffered an effective counterattack from stab beetles and other flying monsters.

Their inability to cope with the situation wasn't because of a lack of training. There were just far too many enemies, and the invasion was progressing far too quickly. Not even in their wildest dreams could they have prepared for this.

"N-No way. Aren't those...monsters from the Depths...?" Kei said. She covered her mouth with her trembling hands and turned so pale it seemed like she would faint. "A-Also, this many monsters attacking at once...?"

"Do you have any idea how this could happen?" I asked.

"I-I don't," Kei answered, vigorously shaking her head. "This many monsters attacking at once is like...is like...the saviors' campaigns into the Abyss...?"

Now that she mentioned it, the scene before me did resemble one of the legends Shiran had told me about. One of the saviors led a vast army into the Abyss, but they were routed by a massive number of monsters.

"No way... Did the guys who went on that rescue mission into the Depths screw up big time...?" Mikihiko muttered gravely as he narrowed his gaze beneath his glasses.

The exploration team's Skanda, Iino Yuna, had taken a unit of Imperial Knights into the Depths to search for survivors near the Colony. We couldn't outright deny the connection.

"...I wonder about that."

Something felt off. This seemed inconsistent with Mikihiko's conjecture. I still couldn't tell exactly how, though. In the end, I could only shake my head.

"We won't figure it out by thinking about it here. Our first priority right now is to find somewhere safe."

Even as I said that, I felt my chest constrict. I was aware I was being dragged along by the situation. Acting without knowing what was really going on made me anxious. Was it really okay like this...? I had far too little time.

"We don't know enough about the fortress to know where any safe spots are. Mikihiko, where do you think we should go?"

Mikihiko shut one eye in thought and groaned. "...The area around our quarters should work? It's in the deepest part of the

fortress and all. Right, Kei?”

“Y-Yes sir. The defenses around the saviors’ quarters are the thickest throughout the entire fortress. Even with the outer walls breached, they shouldn’t be able to invade past that point easily.” Kei had managed to regain some composure, or perhaps she was spurred on by her professional duty to protect the saviors before her. “Above all else, the two members from the exploration team are there.”

“Oh, right. Those guys are there, huh? They disgust me, but they’re pretty much head and shoulders above everyone else in a fight. That’s definitely the safest place.”

Mikihiko shot me a look. I nodded back to him and turned to Kei.

“Okay, can you take the lead, Kei? You know the fortress better than any of us.”

“Y-Yes! Please leave it to me!”

Kei clenched her fists and hyped herself up, running off in the lead. I took one last glance out the hole in the wall. I sighed as I watched the monsters loitering outside the walls. If possible, I wanted to get out of the fortress and rendezvous with Rose and Gerbera...but that seemed difficult with the fortress under siege. It was unfortunate, but I had no other choice. I shook off my regrets and ran after Kei.



“Eeek! Th-This way is no good!”

“Fuck! Another detour?!”

How much time had passed since we began running? We’d had to change our course for the umpteenth time now. When we turned the corner, we were confronted with a battlefield rife with a mix of angry roars and screams.

Soldiers were in formation, spears at the ready, as a bull wriggler charged toward them. The spears plunged into the monster, and some even managed to pierce its green carapace. However, the huge insect wasn’t affected and forced its way into their formation, sending soldiers flying around and crushing them.

The bull wriggler gradually lost its momentum. The remaining soldiers surrounded it and stabbed it repeatedly to avenge their fallen comrades. The insect twisted and writhed from the damage, and even more soldiers were sent crashing into the ground and walls. Despite their struggles, new enemies were quickly showing up in the distance.

“This way!”

We left the battle behind and ran down a hallway with Kei as our guide. The army of monsters was basically trampling the humans on the ramparts, but here in the fortress, the soldiers were able to somewhat weaken their momentum. The monsters were spread out thanks to the overly complicated layout of the fortress’s corridors,

allowing soldiers to group up and protect the key points, just barely managing to fight the way they wanted to. Having said that, the situation was still dire. The defensive lines were broken here and there, and the monsters had breached quite far into the fortress. Our escape route was often blocked off by fighting, making it quite difficult for us to reach our goal.

What's more, the soldiers were still confronting the bull wrigglers who had broken through the gate. They were nothing more than monsters from the Fringes, though. Several monsters on top of the ramparts came from the Depths and were far more powerful. If those were to begin invading the fortress in force, the casualties would skyrocket. It would be the end of the line if the invasion overtook us before we reached our destination. If Gerbera were here, we could push through and take them all at once, but as we were, we had no choice but to continue running.

No... Is it really okay like this? Anxiety suddenly assaulted my heart. Could this invasion actually be dealt with? Were we just running blindly into a cul-de-sac? That ominous premonition bubbled up within me.

"Hey, Takahiro," Mikihiro said from my side.

"What?"

I took a look back at him. His face was slightly stiff.

"We got all the way here by refusing to give up, but isn't it about time for us to pay the piper?"

"...Don't say that."

"I mean, you can tell, can't you? This air around us is the same as the day the Colony fell."

I couldn't say anything. I shared his bad premonition, after all. This corridor connected to a future where only ruin awaited us. I couldn't help but feel that way. I had also walked this path back in the Colony. Both Mikihiro and I had gone through it ourselves. We could remember the feeling in the air. Perhaps that was why we naturally felt the same thing here.

"It might just happen," Mikihiro said between heavy breaths. "If worse comes to worst, I'll go first. Then you, Takahiro. We need to protect the girls."

"...In that case, I'll go first."

"No way, man. You have Mizushima. You go second."

His strong tone was one I'd rarely heard throughout our long friendship. I must have looked somewhat daunted by this, because Mikihiro suddenly softened his voice.

"You know, Takahiro, back in our world, you admired Mizushima, right? You might not have noticed it yourself."

I blinked.

“Well, I say that, but I was the same... Oh, keep that a secret from the commander, okay? Right now, she’s the only one for me. Besides, that was just some vague admiration. You were the same in that regard, though.”

“...”

“You finally got the girl you liked as your girlfriend, so you gotta treat her dearly, you hear me?”

Mikihiko grinned. It was the same smile of the outspoken boy back in the classroom.

“I-It’s no good. Here too...?!”

Just then, Kei, who was running in the front, suddenly screamed. We turned the corner and found a 2-meter-tall mantis called a tetrasickle cutting down a formation of spear-wielding soldiers. It came from the Depths. It was known for its two-bladed, sickle-shaped limbs that were so thin they were transparent. The grim reaper’s scythes sliced through the air, sending soldiers collapsing to the floor like some kind of bad joke. The surviving soldiers thrust their spears with a do-or-die spirit, but they couldn’t reach it. A swooping limb sliced the face of a soldier frozen in despair in two diagonally. Arms flew in the air and intestines scattered about.

“Shit! It’s just a little further! We can’t get through this way! Let’s go back!” Mikihiko yelled, turning back around the corner. He came to an immediate stop, however. There was a wounded beast down that way too. “A firefang...”

The figure of a gray wolf, one that I’d seen many times while wandering the Woodlands, walked down the corridor we came from. One of its eyes was crushed and two swords that looked like they belonged to knights stuck out from its belly, but that wasn’t enough to bring down such a ferocious beast. It was dragging the corpse of an Alliance Knight, already torn to shreds by the beast’s fangs.

“...T-Tahaha. You’re shitting me.”

A tetrasickle to the front, and a firefang to the rear. We were sandwiched between powerful monsters from the Depths.

“N-No way...” Kei moaned in despair.

Her reaction was natural. To escape this crisis, we had to defeat at least one of these monsters or somehow slip past one. Our opponents were far too powerful for either action, however. It wasn’t something a simple human could accomplish. Yes... It was impossible for a human. But for someone inhuman, it would be a different story. For example, if a monster were to... Or if the one who led those girls were to...

I stood still, thinking.

There was a means. However, to do so, I had to reveal the secret I’d been hiding. It would exacerbate my situation remarkably,

especially considering that the fortress was under a large-scale attack by monsters. Say a human suddenly appeared who had monsters at his beck and call. If I didn't handle this carefully, I'd be suspected of launching this entire attack.

What was worse was that such a suspicion couldn't be completely cleared. Kei had just said this was much like the saviors' campaigns into the Abyss, but the monsters attacking the fortress were far too organized. This was the source of the discomfort I'd felt before we began running away.

The way the bull wrigglers kamikazed against the gate during the initial attack was particularly strange. It was possible such behavior was due to a certain type of excited state, but from what I could see, the large army of insects didn't show a single hint of that. They were like machines. I couldn't sense the passion of living beings within them.

Furthermore, the monsters loitering around outside were also acting strangely. Giving it some thought, it looked to me like they were lying in wait for any humans trying to escape the fortress. I had to abandon all hope of meeting up with Gerbera and Rose because of that.

The situation was far too extraordinary. I couldn't help but feel human malice was behind it. It wasn't that radical an idea that someone was manipulating the monsters to attack the fortress. There were surely others who came to the same conclusion. So, if it was known I could tame monsters, even more people would think so. Still...

"...This isn't the time to be hesitating, huh?"

My indecisiveness only lasted a moment. Neither Lily nor I could afford to die here. What's more, Mikihiko and Kei were with us. If it was just Lily and me, we might've been able to get through this while keeping our secret hidden, much like we did when we evaded the stab beetles earlier. However, doing that while protecting the other two was impossible no matter how I looked at it.

Last night, with Lily's support, I vowed to overcome the trauma I experienced after coming to this world. I also realized I could trust Mikihiko and Kei. I wanted to believe in them. This was the truth within me that Lily had spoken of. That was why I couldn't let them die. I made my resolve, shot a glance over to Mikihiko—

"...Huh?"

—And met his eyes as he looked back at me.

Mikihiko smiled. It was somehow refreshing, as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.



“Kei, sorry, but gimme back my weapon,” he said to the little girl who had frozen up completely. He plucked the shortsword from her hand. “Let’s do it just the way we discussed, Takahiro.” Mikihiko walked down the corridor toward the firefang. I could sense a silent resolve in him. “I’ll get that stupid wolf’s attention, so take Mizushima and Kei and get outta here.”

“Th-That’s absurd! Mikihiko!” Kei suddenly came back to her senses and began screaming at his back. “You’re not even a knight! Taking on a monster from the Depths all on your own is far too reckless! You’ll die!”

“Tahaha. Yeah, I’m a weakling. Plus, I’m no knight, and I’m definitely not some haughty-ass savior,” Mikihiko replied sarcastically. “But lemme act cool just this once.”

“Mikihiko...”

“It’s all right, Kei. I’m not just charging in without a plan...”

He shrugged without turning back to face us and then threw two of his swords into the air toward the ceiling.

“...Huh?”

Both shortswords drew a parabola in the air as they rotated slowly. Once they reached their apex, gravity pulled at them and they began slowly descending. Spinning and spinning. Flipping and flipping... And then, they stopped. The swords pointed themselves at the firefang while still in midair. There was nothing supporting them. They had been freed from the confines of gravity.

“What the?!”

“This is my cheat: Aerial Knight.”

Mikihiko drew the remaining two swords at his waist. And with his four shortswords postured for battle, he looked over his shoulder back at us.

“What’cha think? Pretty cool, huh?”

Chapter 3: Proof of Friendship

“Aerial Knight...” I said, unable to hide my astonishment as I stared at my friend. “Is that your inherent power as a cheater?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Mikihiko said with a nod. Then he shrugged. “Although, it’s unfortunately kinda shabby for a cheat. I can’t move things I’m not used to handling on my own, and they don’t move any better than how I would use them myself. Seriously, what an inconvenient power.”

Judging from how the shortwords were floating in the air, Mikihiko’s cheat was some form of psychokinesis, but its conditions were rather strict. It was perhaps more akin to creating another copy of himself in empty space rather than actual psychokinesis. This was Kaneki Mikihiko’s inherent power as a visitor from another world...which he had been hiding all this time.

“Sorry for keeping it from you,” Mikihiko said with a sad smile, looking back over his shoulder at me.

“Mikihiko...”

All of the students in Fort Tilia, aside from the three members of the exploration team, were survivors of the home team. As such, none of them knew what their own powers were. That was the impression I was under anyway. I rather carelessly failed to realize there was an exception.

I was hiding my ability from others because of my distrust toward everyone around me. It wouldn’t be strange for someone else to be doing the same thing. This applied doubly so for someone who shared my circumstances. That was why Mikihiko revealing his secret here held great meaning. As someone who was still hiding my secret, I understood my friend’s resolve better than anyone else could.

“I’m not gonna tell you to trust me after hiding something like this, but I’ll show you that I can hold my ground here, somehow or other.”

Just as Mikihiko claimed, Aerial Knight was unfortunately a rather weak cheat. Faced with a monster from the Depths, he knew very well what would happen to him even if he could buy us the time to escape. Regardless, he drew his swords and unveiled his hidden power, saying he couldn’t afford to let us die. It was a declaration of his resolve, and the proof of his friendship.

Oh, I get it. In other words, I got a late start behind my friend. It was

the tiniest bit frustrating. We made our resolve right around the same time, but he took a clear lead. The difference was small, but he had made his decision due to the fact that the person dear to him was somewhere else, rather than right here. But that was where the difference ended. I couldn't lag behind any longer.

"I don't plan on dying here, of course, so I'll catch up to you guys after buying some time. So get going Ta—"

"Sorry, Mikihiko. I reject your proposal."

I smiled at him as his eyes turned to saucers. Mikihiko had put his friendship on display. Thus, I had to answer in kind. I placed my hand on the white cloth that was wrapped around my left arm like a bandage. This was my one and only way of answering my friend's spirit, so I showed no hesitation. I unraveled the cloth as a look of shock painted itself beneath Mikihiko's glasses.

"There's no need to buy time. We're all going to survive and get through this together," I declared as the parasite creeper Asarina abided by my will and stretched out the back of my left hand.



"Mas—sss—ter! Ter!"

I listened to Asarina's delighted cries as I removed the fake cover from my pseudo-Damascus steel sword and threw it to the ground. There was no need to keep it hidden anymore.

"Lily, I'll leave the tetrasickle behind us to you. It'll be a pain if this turns into a free-for-all. Ayame, come to me."

"Roger that, Master," Lily replied in a lively voice.

Ayame poked her head out from Lily's collar and leaped onto my left shoulder. She also seemed happy and yipped at me cutely.

"E-Eeek! A m-monster?!" Kei screamed and shrank back. Her innocent face was filled with fear. This was inevitable, but it did feel a little lonely to witness. "T-Takahiro! Look out! There's a monster! On your...shoulder? H-Huh? But...that one is growing from you...?"

"There's nothing to look out for. They're exceptions," I reassured her in as gentle a voice as I could. "The power I was granted as a visitor from another world is to tame monsters, after all."

"Tame...monsters?"

"I see. That's how it is. Takahiro, you've also been..."

Mikihiko grasped things far faster than I thought he would, in complete contrast to Kei. He smiled, his expression slightly awkward.

"Huh? Huh? Wait a minute. What does that...?" Kei said in a fluster, her eyes darting about in confusion.

"Sorry, but now's not the time to explain," I replied. Then I exchanged glances with Lily. "For now, just think of cutting our way through here."

Lily gave me a nod and ran off. She also seemed to notice the sounds of battle around the corner had come to an end. And just as we thought, a buzzing came from behind us. The tetrasickle had finished exterminating the soldiers and was giving chase.

Fighting a tetrasickle and a firefang at the same time would make it too difficult to protect everyone. I had no choice but to have Lily intercept one of them on her own. Dealing with the wounded firefang was up to the rest of us.

“I’ll take the front. Mikihiko, cover me.”

“That’s a little... Okay, gotcha.”

Mikihiko, a pained expression on his face, was about to object, but he immediately nodded and backed down when I shook my head. This was a simple division of labor. It was better for me to be in the front because I had a shield, and we needed someone to guard Kei.

“Take care of Kei!” I yelled as I charged forward.

The firefang hurled the knight’s corpse in its jaws aside and charged right back at me. Its wild instincts might have detected that the threat in front of it had diminished now that Lily was gone.

Kei could get caught in the fighting if I allowed it to get too close, so first, I had to stop it in its tracks. I held out my shielded left arm as I continued dashing.

“Do it, Ayame!”

“Graah!”

Ayame, who was still clinging to my left shoulder, swelled up like a balloon and spat out a fireball. The flaming bullet sped down the stone corridor, forcing the firefang to twist its body and dodge it. Everything was going just as I’d planned. The wolf’s stance was slightly off now, and Asarina sprang forth to attack right behind the fireball.

“Graawr!”

The firefang managed to dodge her as well. Not only that, the instant it landed, it attacked the now defenseless creeper and tore into her with its sharp fangs.

“Masss—”

Asarina’s head came off with a rip.

“—Ter!”

Immediately after, a new head grew from the severed tendril. Asarina’s head was nothing more than a part of her plant body. So long as the mana she stockpiled from me during times of rest didn’t run out, she could stretch out as much as she wanted, and she wouldn’t die unless her very roots were burned out.

Asarina wrapped her body around the wolf’s foreleg and bit into its shoulder. As a result, I was now tied to the firefang. I promptly gave my next order to Asarina through our mental path, getting her to

contract her body.

“...Ugh!”

A terrifying force pulled my left arm. I made no effort to resist it and kicked off the ground. I circulated mana through my body and strengthened myself as much as I could. Not only that, Asarina’s roots running halfway up my forearm further strengthened my arm, so I didn’t feel the pain wrenching away at my joints as I did before. These were the fruits of our continuous special training from Asarina’s birth up until this point.

I also now possessed enough athleticism to maintain my posture. I closed the distance to the wolf as if soaring through the air. The firefang grew larger and larger in my vision as it braced its four legs. It opened its jaws and flames poured out of its throat.

“Graaawr!”

Roaring fire spread out before my eyes. I didn’t care. I thrust my shield forward and dove right into it.

“Argh!”

I really had to hand it to this monster from the Depths. Even though I blocked the majority of the flames with my shield, the fire spread to my clothes. But that was all it did. Underneath the clothing that I received when we arrived at this fortress, I was wearing the diligently woven undergarment made by the Great White Spider from the heroic tales of the saviors, the high monster Gerbera. What’s more, it was further reinforced by Rose. It could easily handle this level of heat.

“Eat this!”

I kept up my momentum and shield-bashed the firefang. I was a literal human bullet. My shield smashed into the wolf’s snout, toppling it over as it yelped. However, the impact also broke my posture. I hurried to stand myself back upright. At the same time, a chill ran down my spine. I jumped to the side as the wolf’s jaws snapped shut in the space I was just occupying.

I should’ve had the advantage after that clash, but we recovered around the same time? I still couldn’t overtake a monster with my level of physical strengthening. Regardless, it was enough to cope with it. Compared to my training partner Gerbera’s devilish speed, this firefang’s movements were nothing.

Having just dodged its attack, the wolf’s flank was now defenselessly exposed to me.

“Ooooh!”

It was the perfect chance. I roared and brought down my sword. It was a shallow strike, however. I was in too much of a hurry. My blade slipped off its fur.

“Graawr!”

The wolf's claws retaliated, and I caught the blow with my shield. *So heavy...* My stance was broken. Its fangs closed in before I could regain my footing.

"Dammit...!"

I promptly shoved my shield into the wolf's mouth before it could snap its jaws shut.

"Grrr..."

The shield prevented it from biting completely through, but it snarled as its long fangs sunk into my upper arm. My face spasmed in pain. I could feel its stinking breath. Goose bumps ran down my skin as I sensed the flow of mana and the premonition of flames. I couldn't escape like this, but that also meant my opponent was stuck here with me.

"Don't let it finish, Ayame!"

"Graaoh!"

Ayame bounded off my head, using it as a stepping stone, and spat a fireball down at the firefang's defenseless back.

"Grah?!"

The fireball exploded, slamming the firefang into the ground. I swung my sword and sent a splash of blood into the air. I planned to decapitate it with a single strike, but the firefang got back to its feet too quickly and managed to escape, even though it lost its foreleg. It also evaded my follow-up slash. The firefang leaped back to get away. I clicked my tongue. My immature sword skills were one step short of delivering a fatal blow.

The wolf landed on three legs. There was the slightest of openings now that it had to deal with a lost limb, and taking advantage of that, a shortsword flew in at its flank.

"Takahiro!"

It was a blade manipulated by Mikihiko's Aerial Knight. At that time, I could certainly feel my friend's presence in the air. The horizontal swipe from the left was followed by a steep diagonal strike from the right. The two swords sank into the wolf's belly. It was far from a fatal blow, but Mikihiko's sword, tempered through continuous training with the knights, definitely wounded the firefang.

The wolf lost its focus from the sudden attack, especially considering the enemy it wanted to retaliate against was nowhere to be seen.

"Masss—ssss—ter!"

There was no way I could let such an opening pass. I had Asarina coil around the wolf's neck. This was the perfect opportunity. I resolved myself and kicked off the ground with all my might. Asarina pulled my body toward the firefang and I held my sword at the ready. The firefang opened its jaws to intercept me, baring its fangs, and I

thrust Rose's pseudo-Damascus steel blade right into its open mouth.

"Haaaah!"

Asarina had fulfilled her duty splendidly. Rose's masterpiece had a terrifying cutting edge. The damage from Ayame's fireball had dulled the firefangs movements. If I showed even a hint of hesitation, the wolf's fangs would've torn through my body. I could feel my certain victory, born from my senses steeled by Gerbera, who had trained me, and Lily, who had supported me during those sessions.

My sword pierced through the roof of the firefang's mouth and plunged into its brain. After one big jolt, all strength left its body.



"...We did it?" I muttered in a daze as I looked down at the fallen monster.

Thinking back on the battle now, my only injuries were some light burns. But I felt a considerable amount of fatigue, and I was tense from being in my first real fight, draining me of more stamina than necessary. This was about all I had to reflect on afterward. I got my coarse breathing back in order and put my hand to my chest.

I could hear my heart thumping. I could feel the lingering memory of battle in my palm. *How strange*, I thought as I cocked my head. I had stepped in knowing I had a sufficient chance for victory. I'd been sure I was a good match for the beast. However, the reality of actually having defeated the firefang felt ambiguous, as if it had been a dream.

"Kuuu!"

"Whoa?!"

Ayame suddenly jumped at me, and I caught her small body in a fluster. Her fluffy tail wagged about as she stretched out as much as she could and licked my jaw. Asarina twirled around me while purring loudly. It was a cry of victory.

"...I see. I really managed to fight."

The outcome gradually felt more real. A smile spontaneously came to me. I tightly clenched my fist. I wasn't the type to revel in conflict; I also didn't enjoy inflicting pain on anything. Still, the fact that a smile escaped me proved I was still a boy at heart.

My first priority in this harsh world was survival. The most I could do without the ability to fight properly was try my best not to be a hindrance. I wasn't really self-aware of it until now, but deep down inside, I might have been ashamed that I had to be protected all the time by the girls I found dearest to me. Little by little, I was making progress. I was genuinely happy I could get a real sense of this.

"Takahiro!" I turned curiously toward the voice calling me and spotted a little girl running my way. "Are you hurt?!"

That was the very first thing Kei had to say as she threw her arms

around me. I could feel her choppy breathing from running toward me at full speed brushing against my skin as she looked up at me with a strong gaze.

“Jumping into such a flame like that...! I thought my heart would stop!”

“O-Oh. Sorry. I’m fine. I don’t have any major injuries...” My voice sounded bewildered. “...Aren’t you scared?”

Ayame was squeezed between us, squinting in discomfort. Asarina, who was entwined around me, had her head cocked just a few centimeters next to Kei’s face. From her perspective, I should’ve been nothing more than an object of fear.

However, Kei’s blonde hair swayed about as she shook her head. “You saved me not only once, but twice. I’m not scared at all.”

Her reply had a childish simplicity to it. It stabbed at my heart and I lost the ability to say anything.

“More importantly, please show me if you have even the slightest wound. I can at least use simple healing magic, so... Ah!”

Kei began patting my body all over but then yelped. She was beyond restless. Such behavior was perhaps normal for a child, though.

“Miho! What about Miho?!”

“I’m fine. I’m done here too,” Lily said, walking over to us with Mikihiko.

She really was fast. Even though the tetrasickle was a monster from the Depths, it wasn’t much of an opponent for Lily. This wasn’t a conclusion drawn from combat experience. It was an established fact in the Colony that defeating monsters allowed one to accumulate mana within their soul, as scant as it was. Furthermore, Lily’s combat strength was amplified by her mimicry from eating monsters.

“Also, I’m not Miho. I’m Lily. I’d be happy if you could call me that from now on.”

“L-Lily...?”

Kei was perplexed. Lily gave her a sweet smile and then turned to me.

“Good work, Master. I’d planned on running over right after I was done. I’m surprised you defeated it on your own.”

“I wasn’t on my own. It’s thanks to Ayame and Asarina. Frankly, I relied on my equipment too much as well. Besides, my opponent was already wounded.” I didn’t mean to deny my own progress, but having said that, I didn’t want to act conceited either. “There’s a few things I need to reflect on. I can’t repeat such mistakes next time.”

“Heehee. That’s so like you, Master.”

Lily’s delight came from knowing that I wasn’t just being self-abasing. I could get stronger. I returned her smile because I believed

that.

“Oh, I guess we don’t really have the time to talk. The path is open, so...” I suddenly noticed a gaze affixed on me. Mikihiko was staring my way. “Oh...”

I had shelved it because of the emergency at hand, but we had both been hiding something from each other. It was obviously somewhat awkward.

“...Takahiro.”

Mikihiko retrieved his shortswords and walked my way. The corners of his mouth...suddenly curved upward.

“You’ve got some great guts, man.”

“...You too. Way to follow up for me, Mikihiko.”

He held out his fist to me, and I bumped it back. It was a short exchange, but that was more than enough. I had needlessly worried about the awkwardness. Something of that level would work itself out one way or another considering how close we were. Just maybe...maybe this was the very first “important thing” I’d lost by coming to this world that I managed to recover.

“Okay. Shall we get going?”

“Wait...! Hold on, Master.” Just as I was about to move, Lily, who had been watching us with a satisfied look, suddenly yelled with a stiff expression. “Look out! Someone’s coming!”

A moment later, I heard the footsteps for myself. And a few seconds after that, a large number of knights had their swords pointed at us.

Chapter 4: The Worst-Case Scenario

A group of over twenty knights appeared from where Lily defeated the tetrasickle. They approached with a speed one wouldn't expect from fully armored men and came to a stop a short distance away from us. I didn't even have time to hide Ayame or Asarina.

The corridor was lined wall-to-wall with large shields held at the ready and naked steel pointed my way. They wore the armor of the Alliance Knights that Shiran was affiliated with. As to be expected of the elites selected to face monsters day after day in the Woodlands, their movements showed no openings to slip through.

"...What do we do, Master?" Lily whispered as she brought her face close to mine.

"Let's just wait and see for now," I replied quietly.

At the same time, I hugged Ayame close to me to soothe her as her fur stood on end and ordered Asarina to stand down through our mental path as she snarled at the knights. Even though they were pointing their blades at us, this wasn't the time to immediately return their hostility in kind. Any attempts at conversation would deteriorate immediately if I did. Though, I wasn't sure whether they would let me say anything to begin with.

"What is the meaning of this, sir?! Explain at once! Why do you have monsters by your side?!" one of the knights yelled, his blood running hot.

Even the other knights were seething and looked ready to charge me at any moment. If I hadn't been recognized as one of their saviors, this would've turned into a battle already. This reaction was pretty much a matter of course. These people had been fighting monsters for their entire lives.

"It can't be... Is a savior responsible for this attack...?!"

I had already considered this outcome, and indeed I was now suspected of being the ringleader behind the fortress attack. Things had yet to deteriorate to the worst possible case, considering they were only accusing me, but it was only a matter of time at this rate. I had to do something before things got worse.

"Answer me! Depending on your reply, even if you *are* a savior...!"

"Let me just tell you now. I've got nothing to do with this attack. I couldn't do such a thing even if I wanted to."

"Do you intend to feign ignorance?! The monsters by your side are

indisputable evidence! The saviors of the exploration team said so as well! That this was possibly the work of man! To think it was in fact true!”

I tried not to stimulate them too much, but they rebuked my explanation with a hysterical clamor. It even felt like I had made things worse. Seeing how they weren’t likely to listen to anything I had to say, I narrowed my eyes. This was rapidly becoming the worst-case scenario.

This is pretty much going exactly as expected, though... I wasn’t too perturbed by this result. I resolved myself for this very situation the moment I revealed my power. The animosity they bore me, the malice they thrust before me, and the revulsion they poured over me were all bearable so long as I readied myself. There was also one more thing I had considered: how tremendously difficult it would be to prove my innocence here.

No matter what I said, it was questionable whether they would listen to me. People with blood rushing to their heads from fear and anger were liable to promptly deny any explanation I could give them. My earlier attempt was in fact useless. Actually, it had the opposite effect. Just trying to convince them was no longer enough.

Their suspicions weren’t based on any real evidence in the first place. What I needed right now was trust cultivated over a long period of time. I couldn’t do anything about that, though, having just arrived at the fortress. If not for the ongoing attack, perhaps I could have convinced them this was a misunderstanding. I didn’t have the time to take things so leisurely, however.

I couldn’t talk my way out of this. Be that as it may, I refused to be attacked or restrained, and fighting people who were pointing their swords at me over a misunderstanding was meaningless. It would be a complete joke if we exhausted each other and were wiped out altogether by the invading monsters.

My only choice was to run away. I could shake off the knights before me, cut through the monster-filled fortress, and escape into the Woodlands. If I could get that far, I could rendezvous with Rose and Gerbera. This seemed doable if Lily and I were on our own. The odds weren’t great, though...

Even setting aside my own well-being, I had a parasite creeper growing out of my left hand and I held a blowfox tight in my arms. Without context, it was natural to assume I was colluding with monsters. In short, our entire group looked suspicious. I had to at least dispel the misunderstanding in regards to Mikihiko and Kei.

Fortunately, judging by what they said, these knights had recently spoken with the exploration team. If I could somehow get them to accept Mikihiko and Kei, I could at least secure their safety. That was

pretty much my plan. I wasn't able to actually put it in action, though.

"Quit spouting such irresponsible bullshit!" Before I could do anything, an angry roar resounded through the corridor. "Attack the fortress?! Like hell we'd do that kinda crap!"

Mikihiko scowled and stomped forward.

"M-Mikihiko...?"

I could see agitation spread among the knights. Mikihiko, who was head over heels for the commander of the Alliance Knights, definitely had plenty of opportunities to socialize with her subordinates. Many of the knights here were familiar with his disposition. Faced with his ire as he denied their accusations head-on, the tips of the knights' blades began to waver.

"B-But, even if that is the case for you, sir, that man is—"

"Takahiro is the same, goddammit! He'd never do that!"

"Th-That's right." Even Kei, who was still gripping the hem of my clothing, cut into the conversation between her elders. "Takahiro isn't that sort of person."

"Kei..."

She trembled in fear from the imposing atmosphere, yet there was a fire in her eyes. I was protecting her just moments ago, but now she was the one protecting me. I was bewildered by the change in flow here and lost my timing to say anything. My glasses-wearing classmate and the young girl still in her tender years were glaring down a sturdy-looking wall of knights.

The stalemate was then broken by a woman's voice coming from the other side of the knights' formation.

"That voice... Is that you, Mikihiko?"

"I-It's dangerous, Commander!"

"I don't mind. Make way."

The knights parted, and a tall armored woman stepped forth. She had short silver hair and a tense muscularity somewhat atypical for a woman. I had met her once before. She was the woman who served as the commander of the Third Company.

"C-Commander! You're okay!" Mikihiko yelled in joy, unable to hide his happiness with his straightforward expression of affection.

"I see you're safe as well, Mikihiko," she replied with a shrug.

She was a woman of few words, but I felt like there was a hint of relief in her voice. That only lasted for a moment, however. She shifted her gaze toward me with sharp eyes like an eagle.

"And you're...Majima Takahiro, was it?"

She probed me with her eyes. She was clearly suspicious of me. However, unlike the other knights, she maintained enough composure to calmly have a conversation. She began addressing me with a careful tone.

“That’s quite the peculiar appearance. It seems you’ve been hiding things.”

“...I’ll apologize for that, but I didn’t have much choice.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. A blessing to manipulate monsters is quite the strange one. It would clearly become problematic if displayed out in the open, and it has in fact become so.”

“I’m glad you understand my predicament, but could I correct you regarding one thing here? I’m not manipulating these girls. My power doesn’t work like that.”

“That’s why you claim you’re not the one behind the monsters attacking the fortress?”

She narrowed her eyes, measuring my character. The conversation didn’t seem to be going my way. It was clear as day that my words weren’t resonating with her.

Seeing us stare each other down, Mikihiko opened his mouth in a fluster.

“Please believe me, Commander! Takahiro *saved* us!”

That was when her eyes first wavered with hesitation. Mikihiko had apparently earned her trust already. His plea for my innocence had enough strength to cause her to falter, but it still wasn’t enough. Even if those words shook her, they still couldn’t convince her knights.

This really is hopeless... I wasn’t mistaken in my assessment of the situation. At the current rate, Lily and I would have no choice but to run. What stopped us from doing so immediately, however, were the footsteps accompanied by clattering armor coming from behind us. I clicked my tongue and turned to face them.

I truly screwed up. We should’ve run away earlier. Now that we were blocked from both front and rear, escaping would no longer be a simple matter. It was the same as when we were sandwiched by monsters. We had to resort to at least one battle.

I wanted to avoid fighting humans as much as possible, though... I turned around, filled with such regrets, and a small sigh slipped from my lips.

“Aah...”

Several Alliance Knights were running our way. Among them was one wearing a white helmet.

“...Shiran?” Kei muttered.

The knight removed her white helmet, revealing an elf with her long hair tied up in a ponytail. Even from afar, I could see her beautiful face and identify her as Shiran.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

Shiran, her white armor stained in what I assumed was the blood of monsters, placed her helmet under her arm and briskly walked our way. She looked at the fallen knight who had been killed by the

firefang and frowned sadly, but she didn't stop her stride.

"...?"

Shiran apparently didn't see Kei clinging to me, or my current appearance, because of the shadows. As she got within a few meters, her blue eyes captured the situation. A look of bewilderment spread across her pretty features.

"Takahiro...?"

Her trembling lips called my name. Her eyes wandered to Asarina, coming out of my left hand, and Ayame, held tight in my arms. Turmoil was plainly written across her face.

This is far worse of a reunion than I could ever think of... Before I knew it, I grit my teeth hard. Her expression conveyed surprise and bewilderment. Next would come animosity and the tip of her drawn blade. That was my prediction. She wasn't a stranger to me. We had a sense of affinity and I held her in good favor. Even though I had resolved myself, thinking of her coming to hate me hurt my heart. It was inevitable at this point, however.

I was a master to monsters. I told Lily the previous evening that I had no intention of throwing that aspect of myself away. I wasn't lying. As such, this was a result of my decision. All I could do was raise my eyes, even as I wanted to avert them, clench my teeth, and see it through to the end. That was all there was to it.

Shiran removed her eyes from Ayame and Asarina and checked on Kei's condition for a few seconds. Then, she finally looked at me. It was the time for judgment. I hardened my resolve and met her eyes.

She wore a straightforward expression. Seeing a man accompanied by monsters before her, her transparent blue eyes...harbored no suspicion or hostility whatsoever.

"...Shiran?" I unintentionally muttered.

A change in the situation then occurred right before me. I didn't know what she saw when she looked at Kei clinging to me, but all signs of turmoil vanished from Shiran's face. Her hesitant steps became firm. The knights who were accompanying her had come to a stop, yet Shiran came closer all on her own. She didn't draw her blade. She didn't ready her shield. She simply stood by my side as if it were completely natural. She then looked determinedly at her commander.

"And why exactly are you pointing your blade at Takahiro, Commander?"

"...How abrupt of you," the commander replied with the slightest gulp, then she grimaced. "Can't you tell by looking? He has monsters under his command."

"And what of it? You don't possibly mean to say that he schemed this attack, do you?"

Shocked, I looked at Shiran's beautiful profile. She was clearly intending to cover for me.

"From what I can see, Takahiro was engaged in combat with the monsters here," Shiran said, pointing with her eyes at the dead firefang in the corridor and my blood-stained sword. "If he was leading the attack on the fortress, there is no way he would have gotten stuck having to fight one."

"That...certainly may be the case, but..." The commander frowned as she pondered over this, but she immediately shook her head. "That argument is a little weak. His unique power is far too suspicious considering the abnormal situation we're in. Even if he's a savior, I cannot possibly overlook such—"

"It doesn't matter whether or not he's a savior."

"...What?"

The commander's eyes shot wide open. Shiran's words were filled with such conviction that her reaction was understandable.

"Takahiro protected Kei. To that end, he exposed the power he had been hiding from all others, despite knowing this would happen. The nobility of his deed does not contain a single hint of evil." She stared at the commander with a powerful gaze. "Majima Takahiro is a man worthy of respect."

"Shiran..."

It was the same thing she conveyed to me when we parted ways right before this entire incident. Even after she learned my true identity, she repeated the same words. She glanced to the side as I was rendered speechless from shock, her mouth curving into a small smile. It was such a charming expression I felt utterly drawn into it.

"...I never thought you would say such a thing," the commander said, unable to hide that she was just as shocked as I was, if not more. "It doesn't matter whether or not he's a savior, you say?"

"Yes," Shiran answered without hesitation. She was brimming with determination to clear my name. "Making an enemy out of Takahiro is out of the question. We should be joining our strength to his so that we can break through this difficult situation. To that end..." And right then, for some reason, Shiran stopped speaking. Her well-shaped brows knit together in confusion. "...Commander? Is something the matter?"

Her quizzical gaze was fixed on her commander, whose shoulders were trembling little by little.

"No, it's nothing. I see. I get it... Heh. Heheh." She was stifling a chuckle, but that didn't last long. She couldn't hold it in anymore. The commander burst into laughter. "I see! Is that so? It doesn't matter whether or not he's a savior? You? Of all people? Now this is amazing!"

She sounded utterly cheerful.

“C-Commander...?”

Shiran was bewildered and shot me a sidelong glance. I felt bad I couldn’t respond to her plea for help, but I also had no idea why the commander suddenly started laughing. However, I could tangibly feel her laughter forcing back the unpleasant atmosphere that had been engulfing us.

“Hahahahah! You’re right, Shiran; it’s just as you say,” the commander continued through her laughter. “The act of sacrificing oneself to save the weak is far and away from evil. It’s difficult to imagine anyone would rid themselves of a safe position in the middle of their own schemes. It’s truly as you say. There is no reason to suspect him. Moreover, with both you and Mikihiko snapping like this... It seems I’ve been mistaken.” She eventually drew back her laughter and then swung her arm through the air. “Sheathe your swords! This man is not our enemy!”

A dignified voice struck my eardrum. At her command, the knights put away their swords with synchronized movements. They didn’t hesitate for a moment. Not a single one even grumbled in discontent. Her leadership was impressive.

“Please forgive our discourtesy for casting suspicions upon a savior such as yourself and turning our blades on you,” the commander said, facing me sincerely. “And if possible, just as Lieutenant Shiran suggested, would you accompany us? We are planning to borrow the powers of the men of the exploration team to begin our counteroffensive. If possible, it would be reassuring to have you fight by our side.”

I stood there watching things unfold in blank amazement, reflexively exchanging looks with Lily. I was under the impression we would have to run away and possibly come to deadly blows. I never once thought they would request our cooperation.

This was a happy miscalculation, of course. Or perhaps it was more appropriate to say this was the precious fruits of Shiran and Mikihiko’s labor. It would’ve been difficult for us to escape the fortress on our own. I needed help to survive. I had no reason to turn down the commander’s offer.

I nodded to Lily then agreed with the commander’s proposal. Mikihiko and Kei cheered, while Shiran let out a sigh of relief. And just like that, with Mikihiko, Kei, and Shiran’s efforts, we barely managed to avoid having to meaninglessly kill each other.



After joining up with the Alliance Knights, we started heading toward the deepest section of the fortress. Our group moved at a jog.

Lily, the commander, Kei, and Mikihiko were near me. The other knights accompanying us were a little further away, securing our surroundings.

I had gotten a simple summary of the current situation while we ran. First, the students other than us were all close to the center of the fortress at the time of the attack and were safe. They were lucky...or rather, Mikihiko and I were unlucky for being at the edge of the fortress. In any case, this was something to be happy about.

The commander's company of knights was apparently focused on defending the inner section of the fortress where the students were. However, the situation turned disadvantageous in the blink of an eye, so she reluctantly had Shiran lead a separate force to begin fighting the monsters who breached their way inside. The two monsters we encountered had been ones that managed to slip through their net.

Some time after Shiran's group set forth, the two guys from the exploration team proposed a counteroffensive strategy. They wanted to head out and fight the monsters. But with such a large army facing them, the worst could happen, even to cheaters. A decision was made to assemble all forces, so the commander went to get Shiran. On the way, they ended up bumping into us immediately after we defeated the monsters Shiran's group missed.

Having largely grasped the situation, I asked about the all-important counteroffensive plan. The exploration team's strategy involved around three hundred elites from the army and knights putting up resistance throughout the fortress. The idea was to start by securing the inner ramparts that had been attacked by flying monsters. Next, the exploration team would use their greatest magics from atop the secured wall to strike down the majority of the monsters. Finally, all that would be left was to mop up the remaining monsters who breached the interior of the fortress. It was rather simple.

The plan largely relied on the brute force of the exploration team, but if done well, it would wipe out the majority of the monsters perched on the outer walls. The cleanup operation also tasked the exploration team members to take the front while having the soldiers and knights support them so that they wouldn't be crushed by the sheer mass of monsters surrounding them. As an ally of the Alliance Knights, I would be lending them a hand with this job.

“...”

“Is something the matter?” the commander asked after finishing her explanation. “You're making quite the curious expression.”

“Well...I never thought I'd be able to work with the people of this world after revealing my ability.”

“I'm afraid to say that it must be nothing more than a temporary

collaboration,” the commander said, shaking her head. “Just as I said before, I would like you to keep your ability hidden as much as possible. We cannot afford to invite unnecessary chaos.”

“I know.”

The Third Company of the Alliance Knights followed the will of their commander without question. However, the Imperial Army and Imperial Knights were a different matter. She had warned me how we wouldn’t know what would happen if they saw my power. From their perspective, it would be like the living god they revered actually being the devil. Unveiling such a thing with poor timing could cause the entire war front to collapse.

Because of this, I had Ayame and Asarina hide themselves once more. This did, of course, cause my combat potential to plummet, so my assistance in defending the fortress was only to the extent of what I was capable of myself. Depending on how things turned out though, I couldn’t remain that way either...

It was honestly a bit of a pain, but nothing could be done about it. Even though the suspicions against me had been cleared, it didn’t change the fact that I was capable of taming monsters. I was still an alien element to this world. I had to remain fully aware of this.

The knights accompanying us no longer directed their hostility toward me, but they still maintained a sense of wariness. I was somewhat annoyed by their awkward glances. Having said that, even if I had opinions regarding their behavior, just being able to fight side by side toward a common goal was far better than what I’d assumed would happen. All of this came from the command given to them by a single woman.

“Commander, do you really intend to fight by my side?”

“Do you doubt me?”

“...Honestly, a little.”

“Haha. How cautious of you. Still, that’s a good thing. Protecting what’s important to you requires caution and boldness in equal measure,” she said with a delighted laugh.

Her attitude toward me was favorable. Unlike the other knights, I couldn’t sense any reservations. It was quite mysterious.

“Why do you trust me?” I asked, to which she raised an eyebrow.

“There is nothing I need suspect you of. I believe I stated as much earlier.”

“You did, thanks to Mikihiko and Shiran persuading you for my sake. I’m truly grateful regarding that... But that was only a reason to no longer suspect me of being your enemy, right?”

Not being an enemy wasn’t the same as being an ally. As someone accompanied by monsters, I was a detested being in this world. Fighting alongside each other required dealing with that psychological

revulsion first.

“Ooh. I see. That’s where your misgivings lie,” the commander replied with a nod, apparently understanding why I had my doubts. “It’s a simple matter. You saved someone I put my trust in.”

“...I don’t recall doing so.”

Seeing my bewilderment, the commander giggled cheerfully. “I suppose not. I’m not sure the person in question is aware of it, either.”

She shot a glance backward as she spoke. Her eyes pointed at the unit who were watching for attacks from the rear, where Shiran was.

“Shiran...?” I asked.

“Yes. She is a girl of pure disposition. I knew both her father and brother, so I was acquainted with her from a very young age. She possessed ideals higher than any other. As such, she applied herself fully to her studies. She endured any and all hardships. She grew up into a splendid knight with devotion in her heart. I have entrusted my back to her in battle, and she’s saved me many times over now. In the process, I grew to trust her and bestowed her with the duty of being my lieutenant.”

There was a warmth to her words. The sentiments between these two were surely more than a superior and her subordinate. I had experienced for myself just how important the bonds built within the harsh Woodlands were.

“...However, she suffered precisely because she’s a splendid knight. Knocked down by realities she could do nothing about, yet still unable to give up, she eventually grew impatient, verging on insanity, waiting for the advent of a savior. There was nothing I could do to help.”

Hearing the commander speak as if she was repenting her sins, I recalled the sight of Shiran grieving over her own helplessness.

“It’s not enough. No matter how much I train this body, comrades I am unable to protect keep dying one after the other.”

This woman had likely been watching over Shiran all this time. She thought of her as a precious comrade in arms, so seeing Shiran suffer must have been painful for her.

“Faith in the esteemed saviors one day bringing us salvation lies in all our hearts, supporting us to live day in, day out. We are here today because of the exploits achieved by the saviors of the past. Because of that, we are always conscious of them, we show them respect, and we give grace to those who have brought salvation to our present and future. It’s natural it became that way.”

“...Give grace?”

Their sense of values was so grounded in religious belief that I had problems understanding some of it as a modern Japanese citizen. In short, I suppose she was saying something like, “Let’s thank those who

have risked their lives for us in the past.” That much I could understand.

“The saviors support our daily lives. Thus, I cannot deny that my own heart also wished for salvation. However, one cannot allow such hopes to go too far. Faith, taken to an extreme, clouds one’s vision. We cannot allow our delusions to conceal what we see right before our eyes.”

I could feel a certain sense of conviction as I watched the commander speak.

“By only looking at something that possesses neither shadow nor shape, one can no longer see what is truly there. Doing so is an extremely dangerous act that leaves one liable to commit grave errors. So, Takahiro...” The commander called my name in a clear tone. “You have my gratitude. By making Shiran say, ‘It doesn’t matter whether or not he’s a savior,’ you have definitely saved her from such danger,” she said with a smile.

I see. So this is the woman Mikihiko fell for, huh?

“What’cha think, Takahiro?” Mikihiko proudly asked after noticing my sidelong glance.

I could understand why he wanted to boast. Unfortunately, she wasn’t anything close to being his lover at this point.

“...It’ll probably be a thorny path, but hang in there.”

“Pity right off the bat?!”

As we talked of such things, we arrived at the rendezvous point for the counteroffensive operation. That was where a problem arose. The exploration team members weren’t there.



“The operation has already begun?!”

The commander’s incredulous shout resounded through the hall. There were only a few soldiers left behind in the spacious room which served as the rendezvous point. The old man left in charge here turned pale before her menacing attitude.

“Y-Yes, ma’am. It was General Greene’s order.”

“He started the operation without waiting for us? Is he impetuously trying to claim the glory for himself? That damn philistine. Does he truly understand the situation...?”

There was apparently some kind of slip-up. The commander groaned as one of the knights came up to her.

“Commander. Now that I think of it, lately, the general has been...”

“...Oh, right. That’s true. He’s also been driven into quite the corner, hasn’t he? But it doesn’t change how irritating this is.”

“What shall we do?”

“We can only give chase. I don’t know if we’ll make it in time for the operation, but we cannot afford to lose the saviors if worse comes to worst. The strongest troops in the fortress must gather together.”

I watched her speak with her subordinate from a short distance away, when Shiran, who had been protecting the rear all this time, came running over.

“Takahiro, looks like there’s trouble.”

“Looks like it... General Greene is the man who greeted us when we arrived at the fortress, right?”

“Yes, he’s the leader of the Imperial Army units stationed at this fortress.”

“What did the commander mean by him being driven into a corner?”

“The fortress’s defense falls under the jurisdiction of the army.”

I paused for a moment and then asked, “Isn’t it a bit cruel to push responsibility for the fortress’s collapse on his shoulders given the situation?”

Considering the number of monsters involved, it didn’t really matter who was in charge. Nobody could’ve done anything to evade such a crisis. Although, taking responsibility was one of the jobs of those in charge, in a sense.

“It’s certainly as you say... But even considering that, it’s true there was ineptitude in the defensive response.”

“...You mean the incident with the drawbridge?”

“Yes.”

The twenty-some Alliance Knights who were about to sally into the Woodlands had sacrificed their lives to buy a few seconds, in which time the drawbridge should’ve been raised fully. But it had come to a stop halfway. If not for that, the soldiers on the walls could’ve bought more time for the rest of the fortress to take defensive formations. The army, who were in charge of the fortress’s defense, could easily be held accountable for this.

Shiran had quite the bitter expression. “In truth, he has been under a lot of pressure from the Imperial Knights.”

“...Is this really the time for infighting?”

“Your assessment is correct. I’m ashamed I cannot deny it.”

“It’s nothing you need to apologize for, Shiran. If that’s the case, then...what? He’s trying to grab any achievement he can to restore his honor and left the Alliance Knights out on purpose to hog the glory?”

“Not only that, he has brought more soldiers with him than the plan asked for. He is definitely panicking. He did have his responsibility over this questioned right in front of the saviors, after all.”

“So even if he survives this, he’s done for.”

The Alliance Knights were supposed to be the elites among the elites when it came to suppressing monsters in the Woodlands. Because of this, the Imperial Knights, who had the same duty, would push a lot of work onto them, so their political position wasn't all that strong. Conversely, this also meant they had much more combat experience. Carrying out a plan by leaving this force out entirely showed a clear lack of judgment. Or perhaps he had a reason to think he could definitely win?

His oh-so-great saviors, I guess...?

"According to the plan, the exploration team's Watanabe Yoshiki will use grade 5 magic to annihilate the monsters, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

I recalled the schoolboy with a small build who was armed with a staff. Watanabe was apparently a warrior whose cheat leaned hard toward the use of magic, even among all the warriors who possessed tremendous physical abilities and magic. Naturally, even for a cheater, using the largest scale magic he could muster required a fair amount of concentration and time. It was the job of the soldiers and knights supporting him to buy said time. In other words, they decided the forces they had managed to scrape together would be able to do so, even without the Alliance Knights.

"...Wait, hang on. Then what about the other students? There's no way they left them behind in a thinly defended location, right?"

"Nope, that was out of the question, it seems," Mikihiko answered, returning with the commander.

"It turns out the two men from the exploration team brought the saviors along," the commander added.

"...Meaning they were taken to a battlefield?"

"Yes. It was apparently Juumonji's idea. There were many who didn't like the idea of being separated from the exploration team to begin with, so even without this decision, most would have tagged along anyway."

"It's surprising how well they've been trained like good little idiots, huh?" Mikihiko added with his usual bitterness as he shrugged. "Well, thinking the safest place is right next to the exploration team isn't wrong, I guess."

"Takahiro, we're going to set forth and chase after our allied forces. Will you come with us?"

"Understood. In that case, we should hurry." I nodded and began running with the knights, but just then, Lily grabbed my wrist and stopped me. "...Lily?"

"Wait," she said as I turned around. Her expression was stern, and she was gripping her black spear in her hand. "It took me a while to find the right one... Hup!"

Lily hefted up her spear, and before anyone could stop her, she threw her weapon.

“Huh?!”

The spear flew through the air with a terrifying force that contradicted her slender figure, piercing through the cranium of one of the soldiers in the hall. His head burst like a tomato, and the impact blew his body back, leaving him crumpled on the ground with his limbs splayed out.

For a single instant, the entire room was left dumbfounded.

“You cur!”

A series of angry howls and unsheathing swords resounded in the air as a whirlpool of hostility engulfed the hall. And then...

“Stand down!”

The commander’s reprimand drowned out all other sound, dampening the knights’ rampant hostility in an instant.

“C-Commander...?”

The knights looked to their commander in bewilderment. She stared fixedly at the fallen soldier with a grimace.

“Thanks for stopping them,” Lily said with a shrug. “I could have said something first, but I thought there’d be casualties if it went on a rampage from being exposed.”

The knights followed their commander’s gaze and began raising their voices in shock one after the other. The soldier Lily killed had changed into a monster that resembled a solidified shadow of a human with no legs.



I had never encountered this type of monster for myself, but I’d learned during Kei’s lectures that this was a monster from the Fringes called a doppelganger. Anyone who’s played an RPG could probably guess, but this monster possessed the ability to copy the appearance of its enemies. This meant that anyone who fell prey to a doppelganger died by the hand of something that looked just like them.

In a sense, it was similar to Lily’s mimicry, but there were many differences. First, it didn’t need to predate its target. Second, the copy was perfect in appearances only; it didn’t copy any abilities. Above all else, it didn’t have a will like Lily did, so it couldn’t mix in among humans. It was of course impossible for one to sneak into a fortress. Until now, that is...

“I didn’t notice at all...” Shiran groaned despondently.

“The sprite doesn’t detect anything unless it’s hostile, right? There’s no helping that,” I said to comfort her. “In any case, this explains the incident at the drawbridge.”

“...Right after the gate was breached, the monsters trampled their

way straight to the soldiers who were manning the drawbridge. Even if a monster was hiding among the soldiers and got in the way of raising the drawbridge, nobody who saw it could have survived. They really got us.”

Now that we knew doppelgangers were mixed in among the soldiers, the possibility that the same thing had happened at all key points in the fortress’s defenses was fairly high. Not only that, they could also be among the soldiers taking part in the all-or-nothing counteroffensive centered on the exploration team. The situation had gotten quite serious.

After confirming with Lily that there were no more doppelgangers among the Alliance Knights and soldiers left behind, we immediately began moving. Fortunately, the exploration team had already cleared the monsters on the way, so our relocation was going smoothly. We had to reach the site of the counteroffensive as fast as we could. If we didn’t, the plan which carried the entire fate of the fortress could hit a major setback.

“What’s wrong, Master?” Lily asked, running by my side. She was looking at me with an anxious expression. “You’re making a weird face.”

“It’s nothing. I just don’t like it.”

“Don’t like what?” Lily asked, cocking her head and blinking curiously.

“We’re on the back foot right now. The incident with the doppelganger is one thing, but the entire situation feels like we’re always playing catchup. It’d be better to assume that, at the very least, everything up until now is going exactly how our ‘enemy’ wanted it to go.”

“That makes sense.”

“Under that assumption... Doesn’t it feel like the timing is a little *too* good for this kind of crisis to happen right after we arrived at the fortress?”

“Wait a minute, Takahiro,” Shiran cut in upon hearing us. “Do you mean to say the saviors’ visit was the trigger for this attack?”

“I’m just saying it’s possible.”

In short, it was the same as when Kei disappeared. It was the very first time it had happened, and it occurred when we students arrived at the fortress. Here we had an attack by a large army of monsters, also an unprecedented event. It wasn’t all that strange to suspect a relationship between our arrival and the attack.

“So long as there are doppelgangers infiltrating the fortress, the possibility this is merely monsters running wild is pretty much nil. There’s a mastermind behind the attack, an ‘enemy.’ If everything is going exactly as they planned, the current flow of events could be

pretty bad.”

“Meaning?”

“If they’re taking such actions because of our arrival at the fortress, then they obviously know the exploration team is here too.”

“You can’t mean...! They already expect us to rely on the power of the saviors?!” Shiran went wide-eyed upon realizing what I was getting at.

“There’s no way they wouldn’t anticipate the strongest fighting force in the fortress to participate in this battle.”

“...In other words, the situation has gotten rather dire.”

“Yeah. It’s a good plan to use the exploration team as a pivot to launch a counteroffensive—under normal circumstances, at least. But if the enemy knows of the presence of the exploration team, its effectiveness becomes somewhat suspect. They will absolutely have a countermeasure ready if they started all this knowing the guys from the exploration team were here.”

“It can’t be...”

“I might just be overthinking things.”

I added that because of how much of a shock this seemed to be for Shiran. In truth, a large portion of what I was saying was nothing more than supposition. Everything was based on the assumption that this all happened because of the students’ arrival at the fortress. I still had doubts as to how they could possibly deal with the exploration team too. At any rate, they were cheaters who possessed tremendous powers in this world.

I had a habit of theorizing the worst-case scenario because of my experiences up until now, so this could be nothing more than needless anxiety. Still, I believed it was best to be ready for the worst. “Being cautious is a good thing,” so the commander had told me. I was in full agreement.

I got my thoughts running as I dashed up the staircase to the top of the inner ramparts alongside the knights. If it was me, how would I deal with cheaters? Judging from what I could see from the monsters’ behavior, the perpetrator behind this incident presumably possessed an ability similar to mine. As such, there wasn’t a more suitable person out there to think the way they did.

And after thinking, and thinking, and thinking...the conclusion I came to was: it was impossible.

This was something I had already thought of regarding my own ability. Using monsters as one’s strength was far too weak a power compared to regular cheaters in every way, shape, and form. If there was only one cheater, slamming tens to hundreds of monsters against them with complete disregard for any losses was theoretically possible. However, these saviors of the world had many allies in Fort

Tilia. Defeating them under such circumstances couldn't be done unless they could create a situation where the saviors couldn't use their cheats...

“...”

No, hang on? Isn't there just one way...? One way of possibly killing them? My idea sent a chill running down my spine. It was impossible. It couldn't happen. Even in the worst-case scenario, it was far too horrible. If I was right, the counteroffensive operation was guaranteed to fail. Taking countermeasures against the cheaters would be completely unnecessary to begin with, after all.

“We're almost there!” someone yelled.

I suddenly raised my head and saw the entrance to the inner wall's ramparts at the top of the staircase.

“Lily, get ready.”

“...Right.”

Her voice was stiff, perhaps having sensed my tension. We stood side by side with the knights and went through the doorway. We put ourselves on guard, but there were no monsters.

“...!”

I gulped. A tingling sensation ran down my skin as if my muscles cramped. A tremendous amount of mana was converging above the ramparts. Anyone capable of sensing mana could tell just how abnormal a power was being wielded here. The sheer scale of it would cause anyone to pale.

After coming up onto the ramparts, we began running toward the terrifying concentration of mana. It was clear the leading actors of this stage were present. The preemptive cleanup had apparently been finished already. We couldn't see any monsters. Instead, we spotted a crowd of soldiers and knights. A familiar old man noticed the group of Alliance Knights and turned our way. It was General Greene, the one given charge of this fortress. The students were next to him.

“Oh! Majima! Mizushima!”

The upperclassman who seemed like a class peacemaker, Miyoshi Taichi, noticed us and ran our way with a relieved smile. The three other students who were a part of his clique followed after him.

“Looks like you're okay. Thank goodness. I couldn't spot you anywhere, so I was worried.”

“Miyoshi, how's the... Where's the exploration team?!”

“Huh? O-Oh. They're right over there.”

Miyoshi Taichi pointed toward the two boys in confusion. I shifted my focus over to them as an enormous green glyph covered the sky above us. Opposite a large line of soldiers, I could see a schoolboy with a small build standing on the edge of the ramparts. The glyph was expanding from the staff he held above his head.

“Okay! I’m ready!”

It was the exploration team’s Watanabe Yoshiki. Standing next to him was his fellow member, Juumonji Tatsuya, who had a broadsword in one hand and a red glyph ready in the other.

“Let’s do this!”



The green glyph radiated a dazzling light. The soldiers and knights were keeping a watch on their surroundings while the exploration team constructed their magic, but now all eyes were nailed to the spectacle playing out before them. That only stood to reason. They were likely thinking how they were all standing in a scene straight out of the legends of saviors.

Even I thought it was striking, so it was sure to leave a larger impression on the locals. According to what I heard from Kei, the people of this world were limited to what we called grade 3 magic, meaning grade 5 magic was a leap beyond unattainable to them.

This boy held such a miracle in his hands. If he were so inclined, he could reduce this entire fortress to rubble. Actually, even though I knew he was wielding it against the monsters, the omen of destruction was so massive it made me worry whether the fortress would suffer major damage.

“Know of the pain of those you’ve killed!” Watanabe declared triumphantly as he swung down his brilliant staff.

It was like the hammer of god. The ultimate strike that required time for one called a savior to prepare.

The atmosphere trembled.

This was grade 5 wind magic. Anything and everything would be blown away in an absolutely violent gale.

But...right before that could happen, something flew high into the sky.

It was like a ball, thrown playfully by a child, slowly arching through the air.

It was none other than Watanabe’s head.

“Huh?”

He undoubtedly had no idea what had happened at all. A dumbfounded expression remained plastered on his face. It was far too sudden and unexpected, to a cruel degree. Anybody could tell what happened at a glance, yet everybody’s thoughts froze over completely. It was something that should never have been allowed to occur.

Aah... This really is the worst... Juumonji, having just decapitated Watanabe, turned the glyph he was supposed to fire at the monsters toward the group of humans instead. There was no longer time to run away.

“Take cover!”

Could anybody even react to my screaming? Juumonji activated his grade 4 fire magic. The crimson glyph scattered a countless number of fireballs into the air. It looked just like that time I was attacked by a pack of over thirty blowfoxes, but in terms of pure firepower, this far surpassed that.

One of the fireballs flew toward a group of students. I could see the bullied kid, Kudou Riku, standing there in a daze, watching the incoming blaze. “The strong do whatever they want.” That was what he had once said. Even he couldn’t have imagined that his end would come so miserably.

Fireballs poured down on the soldiers and knights who had gathered to protect the exploration team. There was no discrimination. There was nowhere to run. Over a hundred fireballs exploded, turning the inner ramparts of Fort Tilia into a scorching hell.

Chapter 5: The Traitor's Motive

Watanabe's decapitated head tumbled through the air. His soulless eyes reflected the scene playing out beneath them. Viscous red liquid spurted from his now headless body. The soldiers, knights, and students looking up at him were splattered in crimson.

I could almost hear it. Something I'd once lost, that "wonderful thing" everyone possessed and I envied from afar, shattered ever so easily. It was the sound of the world crumbling to pieces—the moment the mirage one so naively believed in vanished.

The first time I'd heard it remained vividly in my mind. It was just a little over two months ago now. It was when the outrageously powerful cheaters destroyed the Colony, the settlement we had built in the Depths.

Tragedy didn't occur without a reason. We had suddenly found ourselves inside an unfamiliar forest. Not only that, there were beasts all around us who should've belonged purely in fiction. The miserable deaths of our classmates, almost unthinkable in peaceful Japan, greatly affected our minds.

That wasn't all either. Thanks to the blessing of cheats, we managed to hunt monsters and secure enough food to avoid starvation within a few days. That was merely meeting the bare minimum for life, however. We no longer had convenience stores or supermarkets. Even if we weren't dying from starvation, hunger remained our constant companion. Our quality of life was basically nil.

Also, with such a large gathering of people forced to work together, even if in small groups, it was inevitable that cliques would form and friction would be born. We students didn't have the experience or know-how to adjust to such a lifestyle.

Much like sand pouring down an hourglass, anxiety grew stronger and dissatisfaction piled up. Unable to endure the weight of the falling sand, our minds began to crack. It was the countdown to our own destruction.

In the end, when a portion of the exploration team began rampaging, the accumulated stress within us exploded like a lit powder keg. The cornered students turned into rioters. There were no laws, no police, nothing at all to stop the rampage.

"The strong act however they want."

Kudou's words were reality. At the very least, they were valid in

that chaos. However, we were no longer in a lawless forest with no public order. We were in Fort Tilia. We had set foot within the world of humanity.

“Our hardships are over. We’re saved. With this, such a tragedy will never happen again.”

Everyone had believed so. They’d never doubted it. If the people sent to this world had been nothing more than powerless victims, there wouldn’t have been any problems whatsoever from this point onward. That wasn’t the case, however. We weren’t powerless victims. We possessed far too tremendous a power. Our cheats had to be factored into these calculations.

This world definitely had laws of its own. They of course had the means to enforce and maintain such laws. I didn’t know the details, having only stayed within a military facility deep inside the forest, but they had an army and knights. It wasn’t hard to imagine these forces, or one similar to them, serving such a role.

But if someone were to ask me whether such organizations could suppress the tremendous power of cheaters... The answer was no, they couldn’t. The power of cheaters was preposterous. A deterrence that didn’t work was no deterrence at all. As such, things were the same as they were in the Woodlands. Kudou was right.

“Nothing has changed at all.”

Right here was a future that mirrored the day the Colony fell. The strong did whatever they wanted and revived a tragedy. That “wonderful thing” was smashed to atoms and would never go back to how it was.



The deafening explosions and the roaring of collapsing stone resounded far and wide. The very fortress, built for the sake of war, couldn’t withstand the countless fireballs coming from the exploration team’s Juumonji. Just thirty seconds ago, there was a line of soldiers and knights grouped up on the inner walls, but that entire section had collapsed one floor down and was now a tragic mountain of rubble. It was a scene right out of a nightmare.

“Hah... Haha! Hahahahaha! Well, ain’t that amazing!”

A boy stood on the edge of the hole, looking down at the mountain of pulverized rubble as he laughed. The name of the boy with disheveled dirty-blond hair was Sakagami Gouta. He was one of the students. Even with such a tragedy before him, he burst into laughter. His uncontrollable cackling was filled with resentment, expressing his malicious joy at watching those he’d held a grudge against crushed before him.

“They’re minced meat! Minced fucking meat! Serves you right,

assholes!”

“Oh, Sakagami...”

A voice put a damper on Sakagami’s joy. Simple wind magic blew away the dust in the air, revealing Juumonji Tatsuya. His magic had caused his own foothold to crumble, so he was caught in the collapsed wall section as well. Having said that, he wasn’t stupidly injured in the process. This was well within his range of expectations.

“Hey, Tatsuya! Wasn’t that a little mean?!”

With the dust rising above him, Sakagami looked down at the gloomy rubble, whose lighting fixtures had been destroyed by the collapse, and began grumbling to Juumonji.

“What’re you talking about?”

“The monsters on the outer walls! Watanabe’s magic annihilated them ’cause you were too slow! You could’ve offed him before he activated it, right?!”

“I feel bad that happened after you gathered so many of them, but just accept it as an inevitable loss.” In contrast to his words, he didn’t seem apologetic in the least. Juumonji patted the dust off his dirty uniform before continuing. “I didn’t want to get injured. Even though his abilities leaned far more toward magic, Watanabe was still a warrior. He might’ve resisted if I got the timing wrong. I had to attack him while he was unleashing his greatest magic to get rid of him for sure. It would’ve been fine if he’d went out with Iino into the Woodlands, but seeing as he didn’t, this was a necessary sacrifice.”

“That may be the case, but ya know...”

“Since Watanabe lost control in the middle of activating his magic, its power should’ve dropped a lot. I guess monsters don’t amount to much. Whatever. More importantly...” Juumonji glared up at Sakagami. “I thought I told you not to come out until I said it was okay. There was what you did yesterday too. Don’t go doing whatever you want.”

Sakagami flinched. “Ugh... M-My bad. B-But, come on. You don’t have to be such a hard-ass, right? Look, we annihilated the main force just like we planned. This fortress is done for. The monsters left inside will be more than enough to kill the rest. Nothing dangerous is gonna happen just from me coming out like this...”

“They weren’t annihilated.”

“What?”

“I’m telling you they’re not all dead. I’m impressed. To so doggedly cling to life in such a situation. Right...” Juumonji turned his attention away from the hysterical Sakagami and looked right at me.

“Majima, was it?”

I stared right back at Juumonji’s virile face.

“From what I can see, you manipulate monsters... That’s the same

kind of ability Sakagami has. How surprising. So that's your cheat. I thought you were different from the others, but I never figured you'd be hiding your power. Also, looks like Mizushima there can use magic, huh?"

I was already postured for battle. Asarina was stretching out of my left hand, and Ayame was riding on my right shoulder. Lily had her spear in hand at my side and had her mana ready to shoot magic at any time.

We had somehow managed to survive the grade 4 magic that Juumonji had unleashed. This of course had nothing to do with my own strength. Even if I had managed to bolster my body with mana, I wouldn't have been able to get away from those explosions safely.

I had instructed Lily to prepare for battle right before we came out of the staircase, just in case. This decision paid off in spades. The moment Juumonji revealed his true nature, Lily's magic was already set to go, so she was able to counterbalance the fire magic he unleashed at us. If she didn't specialize in water magic, or if Juumonji's magic prioritized destructive power over area of effect, we'd probably be lying in a pile of rubble ourselves. Her magic was just barely sufficient, but it did in fact succeed in protecting us.

Lily's magic had also protected those near us. Kei, who was right by our side, didn't have much in terms of injuries. The lucky students who had come to talk to us, Miyoshi Taichi and his friends, didn't suffer any fatal wounds. Shiran, the commander, Mikihiko, and the other Alliance Knights also survived. It had all happened in an instant, so we couldn't cover them as well, but they likely used magic to intercept the attack in the same way when they realized what was happening. Everyone else, however, was annihilated.

"H-How dare you! My comrades! Unforgivable!"

"You also instigated this attack?! You bastard!"

"Ooooh!"

Three of the surviving Alliance Knights charged forth, shouting stiffly.

"W-Wait! Don't charge in recklessly!"

The commander's cry didn't reach them. The blood rushing to their heads from anger and fear deafened them to her words. The half-panicking knights kicked off the rubble and closed in on Juumonji. A fireball struck one of them. The knight's body blew back and tumbled across the floor. Flames burst from the openings in his armor like some strange piece of artwork.

"Much too slow."

"Eep?!"

By the time they'd heard him, Juumonji dashed forward and bisected one of the two remaining knights at the waist. The last knight

held up his large shield to protect himself, but a kick sent him flying backward into the rubble with the force of a bullet, leaving him totally motionless. A large puddle of blood began forming on the ground beneath him.

“R-Ridiculous... In just a single instant...?” the commander groaned.

Though I watched it from beginning to end, my spine froze over at the sight of Juumonji’s devilish strength. Using magic required gathering mana so that the user could construct a glyph. Naturally, the stronger the magic, the more mana it needed. Juumonji’s fire magic just now required pretty much no time at all to unleash, yet it had the power of grade 2 magic. It was proof of how colossal an amount of mana Juumonji held within his body.

Even if he couldn’t compare to the Skanda Iino Yuna, his speed was still monstrous. His single slash which had bisected a fully armored opponent was one thing, but beating the experienced Alliance Knights so soundly in close combat was far more terrifying, even considering they had lost themselves in the moment. In truth, if Juumonji had shown even the slightest of openings, Lily was planning to charge him with a do-or-die suicide attack. I could sense it through our mental path. I had also braced myself to support her. But Lily didn’t move. She couldn’t move. He had killed the knights in an instant. There was no time for anything close to an opening.

The most terrifying thing, though, was that Juumonji’s expression didn’t budge. It wasn’t that he was resolving himself for combat or anything like that. His expression was entirely cold. It was as if he was looking at us all like simple objects. In fact, that was probably exactly how we looked in his eyes. That was why he was capable of killing hundreds of people at once.

As I remained conscious of this chilling sensation, I opened my mouth stiffly. “Were you planning this from the very beginning?”

A lot of things made sense if so. Ever since we arrived at the fortress, Juumonji spent a lot of time managing the other students. His behavior was such that even I could admire him, despite having opinions regarding the man himself.

If all these efforts were for his own sake, it was actually rather convincing. He took action to gain the trust of the other students and the people of the fortress so that he could accomplish his own goal. Sakagami was his accomplice in this.

I didn’t know when they started working together, but there was no mistaking this had all been planned out. Sakagami attacked Kei yesterday because he knew what was going to happen to the fortress. So, before it did, he wanted to... Well, that pretty much summed it up. The reason Juumonji appeared back then was to stop the ill-tempered

Sakagami from using his cheat to attack me and ruin the plan for today. It still bothered me how strangely good his timing was back then, but that might've been purely because Juumonji knew his accomplice was quick to anger and was keeping a close eye on him.

There was one other thing on my mind too. If Juumonji wanted to inspire confidence in him from the other students to pull off his plan, there was another incident that confirmed this.

"The bull wriggler attack right before we arrived at the fortress... You two set that up?"

A monster attack so close to the fortress was normally unheard of. That was why their appearance followed by their immediate disposal was such a vivid scene. It was definitely fabricated to plant the seeds of admiration within the students' hearts toward the exploration team, revered as saviors of this world. As a result, the students trusted the exploration team to such a degree that the foul-mouthed Mikihiko called them "well-trained idiots." But that was all a performance—one part of the play. Sakagami had the bull wrigglers attack the students, including himself, and then the exploration team defeated them.

"Yeah. That's right. I had Sakagami do it," Juumonji said, staring down at me with a strong gaze.

"Why would you do something so brutal?" I asked.

"Why? Isn't it obvious? To survive. There's nothing else to want from this nonsensical world." Even as he denounced me, Juumonji's complexion didn't change at all. "You listening? This isn't the world we came from. Everything about it is different. Nobody can guarantee you'll live to see the next day. That's where we are now. We have to resort to anything so we can return home alive."

Juumonji spoke calmly, as if he was stating the obvious.

Now that I thought of it, I understood the meaning behind the way he had once said "this isn't the world we came from," and "everything here is different." I had first interpreted this as though he thought everything looked different after obtaining lawbreaking cheats, but in truth, Juumonji didn't find any relief in his preposterous powers. He sensed danger to his being here in this world.

And this was what brought about the tragedy before me, apparently. Juumonji was planning to stain his hands with whatever inhuman deeds he deemed necessary, all so he could return to the world we came from.

"Hang on... Return home?" I realized I had let something important slide by completely. "We can go back? How...?"

"Isn't it obvious? Using our cheats," Juumonji replied casually. "You've at least played a game or two, right? An RPG. One where you fight monsters, level up, and learn skills and magic. Anything orthodox like that. It's the same here. We level up until we're able to

return to our world.”

I couldn't respond. Was he...serious? This world wasn't a game; it was reality. We did in fact gain mana by defeating monsters, miniscule as it was, so this was presumably what he was referring to as leveling up... But would he truly be able to acquire the power to cross between worlds like that, and so conveniently too? Was it even possible to gain new cheats to begin with?

Juumonji didn't really have a reason to lie, however. At the very least, he believed what he was saying. Did he know something I didn't?

It's no good. There's too much I don't know.

“H-Hey, Juumonji,” Miyoshi suddenly said, still cowering on the ground nearby. “Th-This is some kind of misunderstanding, right? There's...no way...you'd do such a...” His voice was tragically hollow. He still didn't believe what had happened right before his eyes. All the blood had drained from his pale face, and his tone was shrill as he tried to deny reality. “I mean, there was no reason to, right?! Go back to our world?! Why do you need to take over a fortress to do that?!”

“You seem to be misunderstanding something.” Juumonji looked down at Miyoshi with an annoyed expression. This was all it took to kill Miyoshi's vigor. His body trembled violently in fear as Juumonji spoke to him in a blunt tone. “I don't really give a damn about this fortress.”

“Huh...?”

“Didn't you hear me? I'm leveling up. Pounding on trash mobs takes a ton of time, and it's a pain in the ass. So at times like these, you aim for rare monsters who give more experience, yeah? For example, the faster and tougher ones. That's all this is.”

“I-I don't get it. What are you saying? I don't understand at all...”

Miyoshi shook his head so intensely it felt like I could hear it. It was like he was refusing to understand.

“You sure are a dumbass, Miyoshi,” Juumonji said with a hint of pity. “We can absorb mana from the souls of monsters by defeating them, right? Stronger monsters give you more mana... So, if we kill these beings they call saviors, how much mana do you think we can gain?”

Miyoshi's jaw dropped. His eyes shot open. His body shook even more than before.

“N-No way...”

“Yeah, looks like you get it. You've heard them say this before, right? ‘The souls of saviors are different from the ones of the humans of this world.’” Juumonji thrust his finger at Miyoshi, who was now pale as a sheet. “Rare monsters who give tons of XP. In short, I'm referring to you guys. Unfortunately, there's only a thousand of you in

this world. I need to get as many as I can before the others snatch them away, or I'll be at a disadvantage later. It's a scramble for resources, basically."

Juumonji's eyes weren't even looking at Miyoshi as an object. In his view, all the students, including Miyoshi, were nothing more than experience points. The other humans here didn't even enter his field of vision.

How many hundreds of people died in the battle today? Counting the ones who were killed by monsters, easily over a thousand had lost their lives. And yet, Juumonji didn't show a single sign that his heart regretted what he had done.

"Hm, I get it now. I guess my mana went up by ten percent or so? Haha. With this, I'm one step closer to my goal."

All the loss of life didn't mean a thing to him. Juumonji simply looked at what he had obtained, and smiled. Did he have this sort of disposition to begin with? Or did the stress of coming to this world change him? I didn't know, but the one thing I was certain of was that when a human with a horribly grotesque personality obtained great power, tragedy was sure to spread endlessly around them.

"D-Do you really feel nothing from doing something so cruel?!"

"How upsetting, Miyoshi. Of course I do. I didn't want to do something like this. I wasn't really on bad terms with Watanabe, either. Yup. I didn't want to kill him. Really." Juumonji shrugged. "But I guess some things are inevitable."

A sound came from Miyoshi's throat as if his breath stuck. For the sake of personal survival, for accomplishing his own goals, Juumonji would kill people. That was more convenient for him, even if he had to kill someone close to him. He had summarized all of this in one word: inevitable. Faced with such a mentality, no one with normal sensibilities would be able to look directly at him.

Moments before Miyoshi fainted, Juumonji casually said, "Relax, I won't let your death go to waste."

After his heroic declaration, Juumonji stretched out his hand. A glyph took shape, and a fireball made a beeline right for Miyoshi's face.

"Fuck!" I spat out as I threw my body into the line of fire and blocked the fireball with the shield on my left arm. "Ugh..."

I clenched my teeth and endured the shock happening on the other side of my shield. I didn't receive much damage. I was saved by my equipment and the endurance I had built up until now.

"Hmm? You're not half bad," Juumonji said cheerfully.

I clicked my tongue as my left arm went numb. In the end, this was nothing more than a courageous but doomed act of defiance. Juumonji was smiling precisely because he knew I could never beat

him. Perhaps his smile also included a sense of satisfaction that things were going exactly the way he wanted them to.

I knew he was buying time right now. Sakagami, who had been looking down on us from above the hole in the ramparts, was no longer visible. He probably wasn't capable of fighting. Juumonji bought time for him to escape in the off-chance he got caught in the battle to come. All of the conversation he made until now was to buy time for that purpose. If Sakagami were to die, the monsters' siege would break, and any surviving humans who knew the truth could become an inconvenience to him.

Even though I knew this, we couldn't act carelessly. Our current deadlock was merely because he was being careful. We knew full well that if it came to battle, he would definitely slaughter us to the last. We didn't need to go out of our way to confirm this. The situation was exceedingly bad.

A surprise attack had pretty much annihilated what used to be a force of over three hundred people. The only ones I could count on now were myself, Lily, and the twenty or so survivors among the Alliance Knights. Miyoshi and his group had fainted. The only ones aside from them were Mikihiko and Kei.

The worst part was that the hearts of the knights were shattered. Many of their comrades had already died due to the waves of monsters pouring into the fortress. Still, they had gripped their weapons and regained enough morale to carry out a counteroffensive operation. They could do this because their enemies were monsters. They prided themselves on being the protectors of humanity against this exact enemy. With nowhere to run, and surrender out of the question, the only choice was a do-or-die resistance. What supported them most, however, was the knowledge that the saviors were here in the fortress.

Saviors were beyond special in this world. They were hope incarnate. That was what the people here believed, at least. Just by being present, that illusion gave them power. And yet their faith had been betrayed with the worst timing possible.

The knights weren't in the mental state to fight. As for Juumonji, even if he wasn't a top-class cheater like Iino Yuna, he was a warrior. And even an average warrior had enough strength to break every rule in the book. What could we possibly do on our own to challenge such an opponent?

"It's hopeless..."

Someone's weak-hearted groan reached my ears. I could feel despair steadily creeping up my fingers. It was even nostalgic, in a way. I had tasted this far more than I'd wanted to on the day I ran away from the Colony. I bit my lip and forced strength into my

weakened body. I tightened my grip on my sword. If this was enough for me to give in to despair, I wouldn't have survived back then.

I wasn't going to give up. I planned to struggle to the bitter end. Fortunately, we had only one enemy. Even if victory was out of our grasp, we could get a strike in, create an opening, and let everyone escape.

I knew this was going to be difficult, of course. But we couldn't give up. I swore to live in this world with Lily and the other girls.

Like hell I'm going to die to a guy like this.

"Lily."

"Mm. I know, Master."

We were of one mind. Lily gripped her spear, and the moment before we charged into battle...

"Please wait a moment."

A girl's voice stole our spotlight.

Chapter 6: The Knight Who Protects Humanity

“Please wait a moment.”

Her voice was pure. It had a reassurance to it that drove off the despair in the air. Lily and I came to a stop just before charging in. We kept our focus on Juumonji and glanced to the side, where we spotted Shiran stepping forth with her helmet still removed. Mikihiko, who had hardened his resolve to face battle much like us, also looked at her in shock.

“Shiran...?” I muttered.

The expression on her beautiful features was gallant as she glared right at Juumonji. I could tell in an instant. Unlike the other knights, her fighting spirit was at full force.

“Takahiro, Mikihiko, please go with the commander and chase the fleeing Sakagami Gouta,” she said calmly. “If he is the one manipulating the monsters, we should be able to break this siege by capturing him. If so, we’ll be able to create an escape route for the people of the fortress.”

She was very matter of fact, but her tone hid a strong will. Shiran drew her sword and pointed at a crumbled section of the wall.

“With Miho’s...I mean, Lily’s, sharp sense of smell that can even distinguish doppelgangers, you should be able to chase his scent.”

“That’s true, but...”

It was impossible. There was no way Juumonji would allow it.

“Yes, I understand what it is you wish to say.” Shiran surmised the unspoken part of my sentence as her lips curved into a faint smile. “Be at ease. I shall take charge here,” she said resolutely.

“What...?!”

“I will pin down Juumonji Tatsuya. In the meantime, I would like you to capture Sakagami Gouta.”

Shiran pointed the sword in her hand right at Juumonji.

“You sure are making light of me,” he said, snickering. It stood to reason. From his perspective, someone like Shiran wasn’t even on his radar until now. Her butting in like this was bound to get a chuckle or two out of him. “Let me just check. You serious? A mere native defying me? Sounds like suicide to me.”

“I’m serious. I don’t make a habit of spouting nonsense.” Shiran wasn’t getting worked up. She was deadly serious. “I shall stop you

right here.”

“Oh? That so?” Juumonji took this as an insult. His unconcerned expression twitched with a spasm. “Then die,” he said in a voice so cold I shuddered.

Juumonji kicked off the ground. He closed the distance to Shiran at a speed I could just barely follow and swung his blood-soaked broadsword. Shiran moved in response. She decided her large shield meant for facing monsters would be a hindrance against him and discarded it without hesitation.

“Ooooh!”

He stepped in with a single slash. His sharp sword, which had been gifted to him as a savior, came down on Shiran. It was a hardy blade charged with the power to smash anything and everything. This strike from the exploration team’s elite warrior could bisect the sturdy body of a monster with ease. Even fully equipped in armor, the slender body of a woman would be torn apart like paper. I felt a scream in my throat, but right before it came out, the clang of metal grazing against metal rang in the air.

“Wh-Wha—?!”

The utterly dumbfounded voice came from...Juumonji. His cheek had a scratch on it and Shiran was pulling back her sword. What happened? Despite watching the whole thing, I only understood one beat later. Shiran had scraped off Juumonji’s blade and struck him with a counterattack. Juumonji had managed to lean his head to the side with his astounding reflexes, just barely avoiding having his face split in two. If he’d actually taken the strike head on, even with the tenacity of a warrior, he would’ve been killed with ease.

“Ugh... H-How dare you?!”

Without showing a moment’s hesitation, Juumonji unleashed a barrage of continuous slashes. Even one blow could easily bisect a human body. It was like a storm of guillotines. They were far too fast and far too strong. However, Shiran fended off this as well.

At that time, I noticed something sparkling at the edge of my vision. Upon closer inspection, Shiran’s sprite was scattering yellow light while dancing around in circles. Something Kei had once told me suddenly came to mind.

“The sprite who is always by my sister’s side will use earth magic and raise her physical abilities in battle.”

“I see, so this is a spirit’s support—a spiritualist’s ace in the hole.”

The sprite’s magic amplified Shiran’s physical strength to the point where she could deal with Juumonji’s attacks. However, that wasn’t the only reason Shiran was capable of standing on equal ground against him. Her physical capabilities boosted by the sprite were impressive, but even so, she wasn’t as fast or as strong as the

warrior Juumonji. She had skill.

As a warrior, Juumonji was terrifyingly athletic and instinctively knew how to fight, but that didn't equate to skill. Shiran's accumulation of training and life-threatening combat experience closed the specs gap between them.

Juumonji was now being cautious. Even though she couldn't get a counter in like before, she was reliably fending off his relentless storm of strikes. I couldn't even imagine how much concentration and willpower it took to do that.

"We must move at once, Takahiro!" the commander yelled, forcefully grabbing my arm. Her subordinates were behind her. Much like Shiran, her heart didn't seem to be broken either. "Shiran has opened an escape path! We cannot allow it to go to waste!"

"Y-You want to leave her behind?!"

"There is no other way! She will fulfill her duty! She has the power to do so! Why do you think an elf was granted the important rank of lieutenant in a company of knights to begin with?!"

The reason an elf was granted a rank among knights...? I had never thought about it before. What did it have to do with the current situation? I pondered over the meaning of the commander's words as a sight jumped into view.

"Scurrying and scurrying and scurrying! You pain in the ass!" Juumonji yelled.

He jumped into the air. His large body was brimming with a surging wave of mana. He was about to unleash magic. Not off-the-cuff magic like he used before. This was his real magic. By the time he landed, Juumonji had accumulated even more mana and deployed his glyph.

"Go to hell!"

He unleashed grade 3 magic. In just a few seconds, he wove together the greatest force the people of this world could manifest. Flames shot out of the broadsword in his hand, forming an enormous blade of fire.

"Ooooooh!"

The flaming sword came down in a diagonal slash, landing a direct hit where Shiran was standing. An enormous explosion broke out. Rubble flew into the air, the shock wave carrying it all the way over to where we were standing. Kei screamed, and I pulled her toward me and protected her with my shield. The heatwave passed, and all that was left at the center of the explosion...was a single girl.

"Wh...at...?"

Juumonji was left completely dumbfounded, staring at Shiran, who was still fully armored and suffering from nothing more than light burns.

“Those are...” I muttered.

She stood there with dignity, and around her...spirits were dancing about in a somewhat comical fashion. Elves who possessed the qualifications to do so could take on a spirit's trial to form a contract with them, though at the risk of their own lives. It was the elves' trump card that only their greatest spiritualists could obtain. I knew this, but I couldn't help but doubt my eyes. There were four spirits in total around Shiran. They formed a circle around her as they danced about.

“Juumonji Tatsuya. *You would do well not to make light of us.*”

Aside from the yellow sprite who always floated about her, there was now a red, blue, and green one as well. All four of them had apparently blocked the flaming sword together. They likely also protected the knights from Juumonji's grade 4 magic that had caused the ramparts to collapse.

Now that I thought of it, when Kei was bragging about her older sister, she had said Shiran's swordsmanship was amazing, she was a spectacular spiritualist, and that wasn't all there was to her. I could only agree after seeing the scene before me. Regardless of the Alliance Knights' weak position in Fort Tilia, and regardless of the commander's recommendation, there had to be a reason for an elf, a race that faced discrimination, and a young girl at that, to be appointed as a lieutenant. It was because of Shiran's overwhelming combat prowess.

“Ooh. I see. You didn't know, Takahiro?” Mikihiko said, standing close to the commander. “The strongest knight in the northern Woodlands. That's Shiran.”

I gulped. The strongest knight in the northern Woodlands. This was the frontline in the eternal battle against monsters, so it meant she was among the highest class of knights in the entire world.

Now that he mentioned it, something did come to mind. When the counteroffensive operation was decided on, the commander went out of her way to go get Shiran. She was also the one selected to go into the Depths to rescue any surviving visitors from other worlds. Knowing the importance such visitors had to them, it would only stand to reason that the strongest force in Fort Tilia be dispatched to carry out the mission. *That was Shiran.*

“It's not enough. Not with this body. No matter how much I train myself, comrades I'm unable to protect keep dying one after another.”

Shiran put in all her effort yet still grieved that she hadn't reached her ideal. Precisely because she clawed her way further and further, her nonstop devotion crystallized into the position of the strongest knight in the northern Woodlands. And now that Shiran could say it didn't matter whether I was a savior, much like the commander

mentioned, she had the willpower to point her blade at a savior of this world. Faced with an alien who used his rule-breaking power to spread meaningless tragedy, this strongest of knights was now the bulwark that blocked his path.

“Please leave this to me!” Shiran yelled, keeping her back to us. “I shall hold Juumonji Tatsuya here until you manage to capture Sakagami Gouta!”

“Shiran...”

I hesitated. Unlike the other knights, with their crushed spirits, Lily and I could still fight. Wasn't it better for us to work with Shiran to take Juumonji down? Any hope of defeating him was still meager, however. At worst, we could even hold her back. However, Shiran was able to contend with Juumonji, so leaving things to her and doing something only we were capable of stood to reason.

Just as she said, if we could secure Sakagami, we could force the monsters besieging the fortress to retreat. By doing so, the soldiers still here could escape into the forest. Even Juumonji wouldn't be able to slaughter hundreds of people scattering into the trees all on his own.

The monster problem could be solved by having Shiran detain Juumonji while we chased after Sakagami. Shiran had the detection ability of the spirits. If the monsters were to disappear, she would definitely sense it happening. This meant she could retreat when the time was right. This was the best choice there was. Even I could see that.

I could see it, but...did that really make it okay to leave Shiran on her own? She believed in me. Could I really leave such a...no, even disregarding that, could I really leave a girl here all on her own...?

“Takahiro,” Shiran said, noticing my hesitation. Her voice was cheerful. “Didn't I tell you already? I'm looking forward to speaking with you again, remember?”

“Shiran...”

“Please go, so that we can take hold of such a future.”

Those words dispelled the last of my doubts.

“I'll capture Sakagami as quickly as possible! Don't die!”

I turned on my heels and ran. I could hear Juumonji's roars behind me along with the intense sounds of battle. I suppressed my urge to turn around and ran into the corridor from the collapsed ramparts.

“Let's go!”

“Right!”

Lily nodded and took the lead. For now, accompanied by the knights, we simply ran.

Chapter 7: The Shadow That Connects Far and Wide

We left Shiran behind and began our chase after Sakagami. The surviving students, Miyoshi's group, suffered wounds that couldn't be healed right away with healing magic, so we left three knights with them to take them elsewhere. They were probably hiding in one of the corners of the fortress by now. At present, the monsters hadn't gotten that far in yet, so they were probably safe. At least it was better than running around the fortress with us.

On the other hand, Mikihiko and Kei wished to come with us. Mikihiko had his Aerial Knight, whereas Kei could use some magic, including healing magic. They could both be useful in the rear guard... Having said that, with our forces down to twenty knights, we were glad for any help we could get.

After parting with Miyoshi's group, we started by going to the section of the ramparts where we last saw Sakagami. Lily caught his scent partway there at the staircase. According to her, he was no longer atop the wall.

"Somehow, it looks like he's run all the way to the outer area of the fortress."

"Even though Watanabe's magic pretty much annihilated the monsters on the outer ramparts, the area itself still has monsters who've invaded the fortress. It's a safe area for that guy. There's probably no better place for him to run to."

Lily sniffed at the air as she proceeded onward at a run. We followed behind her.

"We need to catch him quickly," I muttered. The image of Shiran's smiling face remained burned in my mind.

"You can't panic, Master," Lily said, throwing me a glance.

I shook my head. "I know... I'm trying not to..."

I forced a smile. Connected by the mental path as we were, putting on a strong front didn't really mean anything to Lily. I couldn't help but wish Rose were with us. If she were, we could split our forces in two and Lily could go ahead on her own to chase Sakagami. Or if Gerbera were here, she could help Shiran drive back Juumonji.

As I thought of such things, Asarina purred in a hoarse voice, while Ayame lapped at my cheek. It seemed I'd caused those two to worry about me too. I withdrew my bitter smile and suppressed the

impatience in my heart.

“Commander,” I said, calling to the woman running parallel to me a short distance away.

“Aah, Takahiro. What is it?” she replied one beat late, perhaps deep in thought over something herself.

“About what Juumonji said. How much of it is true?”

Juumonji didn’t seem to be lying. He didn’t have any reason to. He was planning on killing us to the last, after all. The problem was whether it was in fact true or if it was Juumonji’s wild delusion.

“I heard there was no way back to our world. Is it really possible to overturn that using cheats?”

“I wonder... I’ve never heard of any such precedent myself. The church teaches us all we know about the saviors’ blessings. It’s possible such a thing was left out of their records, but...” She paused, shaking her head slowly. “I’ve also heard that the souls of the saviors differ from ours in nature. I simply can’t believe such a...”

The commander trailed off, her expression gloomy. She too was a citizen of this world. There was no way she wouldn’t be shocked by such a display of wanton brutality from a being they regarded as a savior.

At this rate, it looked useless to ask for more concrete details regarding our souls. I doubted they knew whether killing a savior granted more mana than killing a monster. Not that their ignorance on the matter bothered me. Besides, saviors conventionally descended on this world about once a century. It was fairly rare for there to be multiple at a time, so there was no way of gathering such knowledge to begin with.

Having said that, it did make sense that killing a savior would grant one more mana than a monster would. It was known that killing a more powerful monster granted one more mana. Gaining even more mana by killing saviors who possessed vast power was just an extension of this. Actually targeting those who had yet to become aware of their own cheats was a brutal idea. Doing it for real was sheer madness.

Even disregarding the morality of it, the efficiency of doing it that way just didn’t balance things out. Juumonji had killed nine students today. According to him, this was enough to increase his mana by ten percent. By those calculations, it would take nearly a hundred sacrifices to gain one savior’s worth of mana. In contrast, the mana gained from killing monsters was miniscule. Defeating a few monsters didn’t even grant a noticeable amount of mana. One could say it was extremely efficient then to kill a savior, but that only applied to the logic of measuring in single units. It didn’t change the fact that the mana gained from killing one person was extraordinarily low.

This was one reason why I didn't even realize if I had gained any mana after killing other students in the Woodlands. Up until now, I took part in killing the three boys who assaulted Katou, and Kaga when he tried to kill me. That made for a total of four people. Strictly speaking, I didn't kill two of the boys in the hut and Kaga with my own hands. Lily had finished them off. Taking that into consideration, now that I looked back at it, I felt like there were signs this might have had an effect on her.

When I had first met Lily, even though she'd struck a magical puppet with her strongest magic, the injured monster's counterattack nearly killed her. That was how weak she was. However, not even twenty days after that, during the attack on the arachne nest, her strength surpassed Rose's, a rare magical puppet.

I had thought this was because of her mimicry, but wasn't her growth a little too fast? I didn't know the truth, of course. The two kills that should have caused the most drastic change happened immediately after she ate Mizushima Miho's corpse. If there was a change, it had gotten mixed in there, and it wouldn't be strange if she couldn't tell the difference. It might've been a different matter if I had killed them all myself...

"Hm?"

After thinking things through this far, I grimaced. I realized something rather strange. After killing another student, I didn't notice my mana change. So how did Juumonji notice? "I get it now." That was what he'd said. So, according to Juumonji's statement, his foreknowledge allowed him to feel that nine sacrifices were equivalent to a ten percent increase in mana. Would he be able to tell if it was five percent, though? What if he didn't know beforehand?

It wasn't like he was staring at a measuring glass in a science experiment. Besides, with only two or three sacrifices, it definitely wasn't noticeable. So didn't that mean he had to have killed ten or twenty people at once to find this out? If that was the case, then it was strange.

Until Juumonji had left the Colony together with the first expeditionary force, there had never been a single instance of multiple people dying at once, murdered or missing, other than being killed by monsters. I'd never heard about it, at least. If something so major had happened, the expeditionary force wouldn't have had the leisure to set forth in the first place. Meaning an incident like that happened after they had left the Colony?

That was difficult to imagine. Every member of the expeditionary force was a cheater. Juumonji was just a warrior. It wasn't impossible for him to kill multiple people at once, but it was difficult to picture. Iino, who was probably making her way through the Woodlands now,

and the deceased Watanabe never mentioned an incident like that. Above all else, judging from the way those two were in high spirits and acting like heroes, they didn't show any signs whatsoever of experiencing such a tragic event. Their journey had been smooth sailing, until Watanabe's head flew off, at least.

Thinking about it carefully, no one else had the opportunity to figure this out... Would it actually be more constructive to view this from a different angle? Any fact required *someone* to know of it first before it could be shared as knowledge. What event, and what human, could've realized this? There couldn't have been one before the expeditionary force departed. And there wasn't one after the expeditionary force left. Meaning... I suddenly felt a cold sweat.

There was one. Just one. A tremendously huge incident that fits the bill... That was the only thing that came to mind. Back then, someone must've noticed their mana amplified after killing several humans. It wouldn't be all that strange, considering the scale of death wasn't measured in ones or tens, but hundreds of students all at once.

The Colony's destruction. On that tragic day, several people probably realized this fact. Juumonji was far away when it happened, though. He couldn't have possibly learned of this.

Is it really impossible, though?

"Hey, Master."

"...! Wh-What?"

Lily's voice startled me. I turned to look at the side of her face, which was strained with a grim expression.

"There's one monster ahead of us. We're going to reach it soon. I'll go ahead, so be careful, okay?"

"Y-Yeah..."

I nodded back to her warning and corrected my grip on my sword. My palm was wet with an unpleasant sweat.

It's possible someone involved in the Colony's destruction brought that knowledge to Juumonji... It sounded ludicrous, but after thinking it over, it felt plausible. For this theory to make sense, though, it required some means of long-distance communication. This world didn't have anything as convenient as a cellphone, but they did have something that could substitute for a landline.

The reason Shiran had gone into the Depths on a rescue mission was because she'd received a magic communique from Fort Ebenus to the east after the expeditionary force got there. Meaning there was in fact a means of long-distance communication here.

The remaining question was whether there was someone out there who could use it with no aid. The people of this world couldn't use anything beyond grade 3 magic, while there were cheaters everywhere who could use anything up to grade 5 magic. It wouldn't

be strange for them to be able to use the same magic the people of this world were capable of. In fact, I was able to maintain a sort of magical connection to my servants over a long distance. This had been fully demonstrated when Lily and Rose attacked the arachne nest. As such, someone with an inherent ability for telepathy being able to serve as a connection between the Colony and the first expeditionary force was well within the realm of reason.

This train of thought prompted one other suspicion. When did Juumonji and Sakagami get involved with each other? The first stage of this plan to murder students started when Sakagami had the bull wrigglers attack us before we reached the fortress. This meant their collusion began before we got to Fort Tilia.

However, Sakagami came to the fortress with the other students Shiran rescued. Their plan had to have taken shape after this fact, or it wouldn't make sense. During this period, Juumonji and Sakagami were taking different routes to Fort Tilia. They didn't have the opportunity to meet face-to-face. They shouldn't have been able to work this out beforehand. And yet the bull wriggler attack happened.

This could be explained if there was something that connected them. In other words, "someone" leaked the information they'd gained from the Colony's destruction to Juumonji, and they served as the connection between him and Sakagami to set the table for this disaster.

So long as they possessed some means of long-distance communication, there was no way of knowing where this "someone" could be. They could've been present at the Colony's destruction, or they could even be at Fort Ebenus, treating themselves to some elegant tea time. There was also no telling if this "someone" was tying together more than just Juumonji and Sakagami.

When I realized this, I couldn't stop a shiver from running through my entire body. Had the poisonous malice that destroyed the Colony infected the first expeditionary force? Would the abnormal beings extolled as saviors once more let their rule-breaking powers go wild? This time, not deep within the forest, but in the world of humanity?

I didn't even want to think about it. The absolute tragedy of it was distinctly clear. I had no intention of ever meeting the expeditionary force. If they went off on a self-destructive path, it wouldn't directly affect me.

However, a vague yet strong sense of anxiety was taking shape within me. The entire world was connected. People lived by influencing each other, no matter how small a thing it was. So, when there was a group that possessed excessive power, was there truly anyone who could remain completely unrelated to their rampage...?

"Okay, I'm off, Master!"

I guess thinking about it now won't get me anywhere... I brought my thoughts to a close. Lily dashed off to intercept the monster who was coming toward us. I decided I would focus on that. However, the dark anxiety buried in the corner of my mind wouldn't go away.



To state the obvious, the closer we got to the outer rim of the fortress, the more monsters we encountered. I lost count of how many battles we'd faced to get here. We had expected to meet the remaining defenders of the fortress, but most of them had already been wiped out. We barely found any survivors.

"Looks like reinforcing our troops is hopeless," I said dejectedly, stifling a sigh.

In other words, we had no choice but to somehow manage with the twenty or so people we had.

"But you know, Takahiro," Mikihiko said, "if we did meet any survivors with you leading monsters around like that, it's pretty much guaranteed they'd draw their blades on you just like before. At least we're getting by without anything troublesome like that."

"I guess. Besides, any reinforcements might end up having doppelgangers in their ranks."

"Oh, that's true."

As we continued to talk, Lily, who was running in the front, glanced back at us. "You don't really have to worry about doppelgangers. It'd be hard to identify one in a big crowd of soldiers like on top of the inner wall, but there aren't that many people around anymore."

This conversation was somewhat depressing. How many people were actually left in this fortress? How many of them would be able to help us undo this siege and escape? We could only do so much, and it was far too little.

"Oh, enemies again. This time there's three."

I didn't know how many times it was now. We once more charged into battle in a corridor filled with dead soldiers. Lily acted as our vanguard, but when there were multiple at once, we couldn't leave everything to her.

"Please take care of the bull wriggler! We'll handle the rest!" I shouted to the commander.

"Understood!"

Lily charged ahead and gouged out the firefang's throat with her spear. Ayame kept the bull wriggler restrained by spitting a fireball at it, and the knights slammed into the caterpillar with their large shields. As for me, I set Asarina upon a monster that looked like a chicken with feathery arms called a gutsgallaz. She succeeded in

biting the chicken's face.

"Oooh!"

Asarina contracted her body, yanking me into the gutsgallaz at high speed. The monster let out a strange scream and lunged at me with its fist. I stooped over to dodge the blow, and even as I lost my balance, I cut the monster's leg as I passed by. I could hear a scream behind me.

"Whoa?!"

I tumbled across the hard stone floor, but Asarina let go of the gutsgallaz and helped me maintain my posture, so I was able to get to my feet without losing any of my momentum. I continued running down the corridor. I didn't have the time to defeat everything I came across.

I could sense magic behind me, and Lily quickly caught up. It would've been problematic if the monsters had taken chase, so she likely finished off the lightly wounded gutsgallaz. However, there would be no end to this at the current rate.

"Have we still not caught up to Sakagami, Lily?!"

"I think we should catch up soon... Ah! More enemies!"

Monsters were gathering together further down the corridor. There were quite a few of them. Just as I clicked my tongue, Lily suddenly raised her voice.

"Oh! There he is!"

Just as she said, Sakagami was among the monsters. Perhaps thinking he was safe in the middle of so many of them, he was sitting on the floor, resting. When he spotted us running toward him, he bolted up to his feet.

"You won't get away!"

We'd found our target, so we kicked things into high gear. Having said that, there was still some distance between us. What's more, the monsters also came charging our way. There were a lot of them.

"Do it, Lily! No being stingy!"

Lily activated her grade 3 wind magic. A large number of windy blades tore down the narrow corridor like a storm, and Ayame followed up with a volley of fireballs. That brought our opponents' momentum to a stop, and we charged into them as a single group. What followed was a melee.

The only thought on my mind was pushing through. I bashed bodies with my shield, repelled claws with my sword, and leaped over the jaws snapping at my feet. Danger assaulted me many times over, but thanks to Ayame and Asarina protecting me, I managed to break through the battle line.

"What about everyone else?!" I yelled.

"Still behind us!" Lily answered.

She was the only one to break through with me. We managed to deal a severe blow with our preemptive attack, but the sheer number of enemies was still a threat. The knights were burdened by their heavy equipment and needed to protect Mikihiko and Kei to the rear, so they couldn't get through.

"Dammit. Lily, give them a—"

"Takahiro! Don't worry about us! Please go ahead!" the commander yelled across the wall of monsters. "Capturing Sakagami Gouta is our utmost priority! Please!"

She was right. What's more, we had significantly wounded the monsters with Lily's magic already. The Alliance Knights were the elite. They could handle themselves.

"Fine. We'll go ahead, so come after us when you can!"

Thus, I ran off after Sakagami with Lily by my side.



Even though I had the assistance of physical strengthening, both my mana and stamina were nearing their limits. Regardless, I only had to hang in there a little longer.

"Be careful, Lily," I said to the girl running half a step ahead of me. "Now that he knows he's being chased, Sakagami might set more monsters on us. We should assume we're definitely going to get counterattacked."

"Mm. You're right."

There was a big gap between Sakagami's physical abilities and ours. He had put a fair distance between us already, but we could still catch up quickly. Then the true battle would begin. As I braced myself, a large shadow appeared out of one of the corridor's rooms. Lily picked up the pace.

"One bull wriggler! I'll get it!"

"Okay. Pay attention to your surroundings."

"Roger!"

Lily leaped high into the air and grabbed the insect's head with her legs as it poked out of the room. She didn't use magic in case this was a decoy for an ambush, that way she could unleash her magic at the ambushing force instead. The bull wriggler tried to shake her off by vigorously throwing its head about, but it wasn't enough to loosen her grip. Lily held her spear in both hands and drove it deep into the caterpillar's head. After repeating that motion several times, the enormous body of the bull wriggler convulsed, then collapsed. Lily quickly jumped back from the corpse and surveyed her surroundings. There was no sign of a follow-up attack.

"That's it...?" Lily muttered anticlimactically as she swung the green blood off her spear. I caught up with her, and after waiting a

few seconds, there really was no other enemy. “What do we do, Master?”

“No point in sticking around here. Let’s keep going.”

We weren’t going to get anywhere grumbling about something as trivial as not getting attacked. We started running once more, but I still had my doubts.

“What was that just now...?”

“It was a little poorly planned for a stall tactic, huh?”

One measly monster from the Fringes wasn’t really going to buy much time. It was pretty meaningless to split up his forces so thinly. We had killed quite a few monsters already, but even disregarding the ones keeping siege around the fortress, there were still supposed to be plenty of the beasts all over the place. There was no reason to spread them out at this point. A practical stampede of monsters wouldn’t have been strange at this stage.

“Maybe he’s trying to buy time so he can gather enough monsters?” Lily suggested.

“That’s about the only thing that comes to mind.”

Or perhaps he was letting us break through easily to loosen our guard. That thought in mind, I renewed my vigilance, but something still felt off. Lily had managed the bull wriggler with ease. It was as if it didn’t know we were coming. It wasn’t getting in the way of our chase, but rather it just happened to come out of that room by coincidence.

Was that even possible? Sakagami passed through this corridor mere minutes ago. It was hard to believe he wouldn’t order the monsters on his path to intercept any pursuers. Why wasn’t he protecting himself? Something wasn’t right.

Thinking back on it now, Sakagami hadn’t brought a single monster along to guard him. No. Even before that, when Sakagami revealed his true nature and spoke to Juumonji atop the wall, he no longer had any reason to hide his monster taming ability. Despite that, he showed himself without a single monster by his side. Wasn’t that rather strange, all things considered...?

“There he is!” Lily yelled sharply.

I also managed to spot Sakagami running down the far end of the corridor. He looked over his shoulder at us with a panicked expression. As I thought, he didn’t have a single monster with him. I honestly didn’t get it, but a chance was a chance.

Considering that Sakagami could be using himself as bait to lure us into a trap, I needed to stay close to Lily. I wanted to attack him from a distance, but it was also a good idea to keep Lily’s magic, which took some time to activate, on standby as insurance in case things turned for the worst. Therefore, the best choice here was...

“Ayame! Stop him!”

“Graawr!”

Ayame puffed up her body on top of my shoulder and spat out several fireballs, sending them flying down the corridor into the walls and ceiling. Stone fragments scattered into the air. Sakagami screamed, covering his head. He came to a stop. I immediately thrust out my left arm.

“Masss—ter!”

Asarina complied with my will and stretched out, lunging at Sakagami and sinking her sharp fangs into his calf.

“Gyaaaah! Aaaargh!”

Sakagami toppled over and writhed in pain. It was like countless knives had torn apart his leg. With this, he wouldn’t be able to run away unless treated with healing magic. We quickly arrived where he had fallen over. I had Lily keep a close watch on our surroundings as I kicked Sakagami so that he was lying faceup, then dug my heel into his stomach.

“Hak?!”

“We caught you, Sakagami. Make the monsters leave the fortress immediately!”

“O-Ow! Stop! I’m begging you!”

“Shut up and get to it!”

“Gyaaaah!”

I stabbed my sword into his uninjured leg. We didn’t have time to take things leisurely now that we had caught up to him. We were just as cornered as he was, after all.

“Shiran will die if you don’t do as we say! Everyone in this fortress will die!”

“I-I got it! I got it, okay! So cut it out!”

“Then get rid of the monsters! Right now!”

“Th-That’s...” Sakagami faltered as he squirmed about. His mouth was chattering open and shut. I was just about to give him another stab when he sensed things were getting worse for him. “H-Hang on! I-I can’t do it right away!”

“You son of a... Are you still trying to buy yourself time?!” I roared at him.

“I-I ain’t lying! I swear I ain’t lying!” Sakagami pleaded with me desperately. “I didn’t say I can’t! I just can’t right away!” Tears streamed down his face as he screamed, his voice sounding pitiful. “I mean... I mean... All I can do is draw monsters to me!”

“What...?” I was left dumbfounded. It was a poor excuse, even for one he had to come up with on the spot. “Quit spouting bullshit!”

“I’m serious! I swear I ain’t lying!”

“So, what? You’re not going to tell me you didn’t give these

monsters any directions, are you? This army wasn't just mindlessly pushing in!"

I pulled my sword out of Sakagami's thigh and thrust the bloody blade right before his eyes.

"Th-That's not it! You've got it wrong!" Sakagami felt his death creeping closer and pissed himself. Then, with fear still in his eyes, he explained, "There's a monster that orders the other monsters! I've only been telling it what to do! So unless I go through it, I can't give orders to the monsters I gathered!"

"The hell's with that?"

"You might not believe me, but it's true. There's this monster that can talk like a human. It's the one who gives out the orders."

I exchanged glances with Lily. A talking monster. It wasn't entirely impossible considering my own experiences. The fact he knew of a monster this world's people would consider nothing more than a fairy tale actually gave his story a strange sense of credibility. I myself had the inherent ability to tame monsters, but it didn't mean I could manipulate them to my will. I didn't know enough to deny that Sakagami's own monster taming ability worked the way he explained it. I could accept that he wasn't able to directly order the monsters around. After all, we could test the authenticity of his claim right away.

"Where is that monster now?"

"I-It should show up right away if I call it. It's always somewhere near me. Oh, but...after we left the hut, it kept a bit of a distance 'cause that Shiran chick's senses were too sharp or something..."

"So it'll show up if you call it? Then call it. Right now."

"O-Okay already, chill." Sakagami no longer possessed the willpower to defy me. This was probably the first time he'd been shaken down like this. His heart was completely broken. "Berta! Berta!" Sakagami shouted. "Come out! Order the monsters to pull back! I'm gonna get killed at this rate!"

His pleading echoed down the corridor. Lily and I kept a close watch on our surroundings, ready for anything to happen. One, then two seconds, and nothing... After ten seconds, the entire corridor had fallen silent.

"Huh...? You're shitting me."

Sakagami's dumbfounded voice reverberated in the air, but it was in vain. So he really was just blowing smoke. Or did something go wrong...?

Just as I started to ponder this, something showed itself on the other end of the corridor. It came running toward us at a speed quite literally like the wind.

"Isn't that...?"

It had long white hair trailing behind it, white clothes, and bloodred eyes. Its peculiar footsteps were those of an eight-legged creature. Its face was that of a girl so beautiful it was bewitching, and it bloomed with an energetic and brilliant smile.

“Ooh! My Lord! I’ve finally found you!”

“Gerbera...?”

I stared in wonder. I never thought I’d see the white arachne in the fortress, but here she was right before my eyes.



To think Gerbera had been behind this entire attack... Well, that was pretty much out of the question. Her name wasn’t Berta, and Sakagami looked absolutely befuddled. She was *my* servant to begin with.

“My Lord! Thank goodness you’re safe!”

Gerbera wriggled her legs about as she ran over and hugged me with vigor. Her white hair fell across my face, blocking my sight, and she pulled me in with such force that I had no way of resisting her strength. Her arms wrapped around me. I hugged her back on reflex and took in her beautiful features at point-blank range.



“Gerbera? What are you doing here? Where are Rose and Katou?”

“What are you saying? The fortress you’ve been staying at is swarming with monsters, is it not? Of course I’d come to save you. Oh, Ayame. Have you been well? Did you protect our lord properly?”

“Kuuu!”

Gerbera kept her hold on me while she petted Ayame, who was still sitting on my shoulder. She had apparently come to save me. I was grateful, but somehow, she was just as unlucky as ever. Thinking how she was perhaps similar to me in this regard, I wondered if she’d somehow inherited that trait from me.

“Although, it did in fact take me some time to get here. I can do naught but apologize for that. Rose was damaged pretty badly, you see. Oh, but there is no need to worry. I simply had to leave her behind in the cave we’ve been using as shelter.”

“Rose? Hey, slow down. She’s really okay, right?”

“Indeed. She’s currently repairing her body while guarding Katou. I couldn’t bring the two of them all the way here, considering the potential danger. In any case, after seeing that she finished her critical repairs needed to function in battle, I headed off to come and save you. But, well, it took a fair amount of time to reach you. It might have taken me even longer had I not heard your voice, and the one of this screaming little man.”

“Hm...? You couldn’t tell where I was from the mental path?”

“It seems to be strangely hampered at the moment,” Gerbera said, putting her finger to her lips and scrunching her beautiful face. “I don’t really understand, but the mental path may be a little unstable right now.”

“Unstable?”

“It does seem fine at this range, though.”

“What’s going on? Is there something out there affecting our connection? Could it be...?”

I turned my gaze to Sakagami. He began vigorously shaking his head.

“C-Cut it with the false accusations! I didn’t do nothing!”

In a sense, Sakagami’s power was similar to mine. I suspected he might have used some sort of jamming, but he denied my accusation. This guy didn’t have the backbone to lie through his pain. He was a petty little rat. Still, there was no guessing what a petty person would do given the chance.

“I suppose all is well now that I’ve managed to rendezvous with you like this,” Gerbera said, hugging me tightly.

“I wasn’t sure you were still alive, especially when a portion of the fortress crumbled. The mere thought of you being caught up in the

fall..."

"Gerbera..."

"Actually, I nearly died on the way here," Gerbera muttered absentmindedly. "Just as I reached the fortress, still unable to find you and at a loss at what to do next, I got caught in some outrageously large-scale magic all of a sudden. I wonder what that was? It's fine, seeing as I managed to escape, but if I had reacted just a little late, I likely would have been blown away into the far-off skies."

"..."

Gerbera had apparently gotten caught in Watanabe's wind magic. Her timing really was the worst. Or maybe not. In the end, she did in fact manage to reach my side.

"So, Master," Lily said, now that we had a grasp of each other's situation. "Gerbera joining us is good and all, but Sakagami's monster who controls monsters isn't showing up. What should we do?"

"Let's see..."

I asked Gerbera to let me go, then turned to face Sakagami once more.

"I-I ain't lying dammit!"

"Yeah, yeah. Enough of that already." I shook my head, then turned to my companions. "Sakagami's pretty much useless at this point. Let's get back to Shiran right away. With Gerbera here, we should be able to do something about Juumonji now."

"Hm? Who's this Juumonji fellow?"

"Gerbera. Juumonji is another student from my world, one of the members of the exploration team I told you about before. He's also one of the humans who attacked this fortress."

"Hmm."

"A girl named Shiran is holding him back right now so that we could get away. Juumonji might be a little tough for you to handle on your own, but if you work with Shiran..."

In fact, we could escape the fortress now that Gerbera was with us. She could easily take out the monsters laying siege outside on her own. It'd be easy to get the commander and her twenty or so knights out with us. If we only wanted to survive, then that was the way to go. However, in that case, the remaining soldiers within the fortress would be wiped out. And we would end up deserting Shiran, who was waiting for us to remove the monsters. I couldn't betray the trust she had put in me.

"Hmm. I don't really understand the situation, but this Shiran you mentioned is risking her life to save you, is she? Then we must go help her."

"Mm." Lily nodded. "I also don't want to abandon her. She believed in our master."

Gerbera and Lily were in agreement. All that was left was to run over. We had to get there as quickly as possible.

“Oh...before that, we better finish him off,” I said.

Sakagami, who was trying to crawl to freedom, twitched. “E-Eeek! D-Don’t kill me!” He flipped onto his back and screamed while still pulling himself away from us.

Exactly how many people had died because of him? I had no reason to allow him to live. Besides, it was frightening to think what he would do if left at large.

“R-Right! I was threatened! So it ain’t my fault dammit!”

“Sorry, I don’t have the time to listen to your useless begging,” I said as I raised my sword. “We need to get moving and save Shiran.”

“In that case, you’re late,” a man’s voice said.

“—?!”

The moment I realized whose voice it was, I turned toward him. Lily and Gerbera were already looking that way, poised for battle. On the far end of the corridor was a boy with a large build, walking our way ever so casually. He smirked and threw what he had been dragging behind him toward us, sending it tumbling across the floor.

It was Shiran, completely soaked in blood.

Chapter 8: The Girl's Resolve and Its Conclusion

Shiran's arms and legs were splayed out as she lay facing upward. She wasn't even twitching. Her body was covered in wounds that made it apparent how furious her battle had been. There were deep cuts in each of her limbs, and her left arm was severed completely from the forearm down. A gash ran down her brow, through her right eye, and down to her jaw, marring her beautiful face. Her waist was cut open, her entrails seeping out. And right in the center of her armor, her very own sword pierced clean through the metal and right into her heart.

There was no life in her wide-open eye. What lay before us was the corpse of a slaughtered girl. In contrast, the one who threw her body as if it was nothing more than an old rag was in perfect health. Juumonji didn't have any visible wounds aside from the one cut on his cheek.

Judging by the direction he came from, he had taken a shortcut by jumping from the crumbled rampart of the inner wall all the way here to the outskirts of the fortress. The reason he went out of his way to bring Shiran's corpse with him was either because he wanted to break our spirits or because he wanted to sneer at us while basking in his victory. In either case, there was only one truth before me now.

Juumonji Tatsuya had killed one of the strongest knights in the world. The girl who had believed in me, who had said she looked forward to speaking with me again, no longer existed. Despite her tremendous talent, she'd never stopped her pursuit of betterment—all for the sake of protecting her friends, her comrades, and the entire world. Yet a man who gained power by happenstance, just from being sent to this world, killed her.

This didn't only apply to Shiran either. This fortress stood to protect humanity from the threat of the Woodlands. It was filled with people who risked their lives to do so. Each and every one of them kept fighting to this very day with such feelings in their hearts, much like her.

Here, all of their feelings had been crushed beyond repair. A savior who emotionlessly wielded a hollow power devoured them and reduced them to nothing more than his experience points. It was unremittingly tragic, and unremittingly unreasonable. But that was

the reality we found ourselves in.

This was perhaps the true nature of the cheats lying within the visitors from other worlds. Just as the word cheat would imply, the power we had obtained truly was unfair. It was an absurd and dangerous power that could crush the feelings of others without a single emotion. How could such a thing be a blessing? What part of this was the power of the saviors of the world?

I stood there in shock as Juumonji's voice reached my ears. "Even if it was for a short time, I'm surprised she could keep up with me." There was pride in his voice. "But it seems that power of hers had a time limit."

"A time...limit?"

What? I never heard anything about that. She didn't ever mention it. And the commander, who should've known, didn't say anything either... But I suppose it would've been a problem to mention it back then...

The commander had said that Shiran would fulfill her duty. She never mentioned anything about her survival. She knew what would happen to her precious subordinate. Thinking back on it, she had looked out of it ever since we'd parted with Shiran.

After giving it more thought, if Shiran's power could be used indefinitely, she would always be using it. Normally, she only had that one yellow sprite with her. Using four spirits was like a full power boost for her. It was Shiran's ace in the hole, her last resort.

"Didn't I tell you? I look forward to speaking with you again."

Shiran had already made her resolve at that time. She knew we would never speak again, yet she sent me away. What feelings went through her when she said that...? I couldn't even ask.

"But I suppose she did her best. She did a good job just buying time with me as her opponent," Juumonji said as he threw what was in his hand our way.

It tumbled across the ground and stopped before us. It was a girl's severed arm. The bracer had fallen off somewhere, exposing a finger which wore a ring shining with a blue light, proving she was a knight.

"Looking at the outcome though, she only died in vain."

Juumonji looked down at her arm and laughed. He was sneering at her desperate struggle and all the feelings she had poured into it.

"Juumonji!!!!" Hailing my emotions, a white shadow screamed and leaped past me. "You insolent cur! So you are my lord's enemy?!"

Gerbera's burning rage and fighting spirit scattered about as she threw herself forward like a cannonball. She thrust out her right foreleg, carried by her tremendous momentum, and aimed right for Juumonji's chest. This was a genuine killing blow from the white arachne, a high monster. Not even a master of the spear could imitate

such a wild and ferocious thrust.

“Whoa?!”

Her talon aimed to pierce through Juumonji’s heart, but right before it could, he evaded the attack with his abnormal reflexes and jumped to the side.

“Tch!”

“What the hell? I thought it looked weird, but that’s no normal arachne, is it?”

Juumonji landed and readied his still-bloody broadsword in a fluster as Gerbera charged once more.

“I’ll kill you! Know of my lord’s sorrow and anger!”

“You sure brought a troublesome one with you,” Juumonji said in irritation as he stepped forward with his sword on his shoulder.

“Uoooooh!”

“Shyaaaah!”

The white tyranny of the Woodlands collided with the violence of the savior from another world. Spider leg and broadsword clashed countless times as torn hair and metallic sparks flew about. The Great White Spider, the strongest monster in the Depths, didn’t take a single step back even when faced with a savior.

Juumonji’s sword couldn’t break through the outer shell of Gerbera’s body, covered in supple white hair. Any minor wounds healed instantly thanks to the white arachne’s terrifying recovery speed. However, even though she overwhelmed Juumonji with her various attacks from every direction, she couldn’t drive in a decisive blow.

Both of them towered above normal in terms of strength and speed, leading to an ebb and flow of offense and defense. Sensing that he wouldn’t make any progress like this, Juumonji shifted his approach.

“How ’bout this?!”

He found an opening in the intense battle to deploy a red glyph. The fire magic burned through the threads Gerbera unleashed and closed in on her.

“Impudence!”

Gerbera charged right through the curtain of flames. She could easily endure anything up to grade 3 magic. The light burns on her arms she got from covering her face wouldn’t affect her in battle, and they would fully heal within a minute regardless. Even as a cheater of the exploration team, Juumonji, who leaned more toward close combat, couldn’t put together any useful magic against her in the middle of battle. Having said that, Gerbera’s threads were poorly matched against Juumonji’s specialty magic. This inevitably brought their battle into a close combat that neither could escape from.

As that went on, I ran over to the collapsed knight.

“Shiran...” I touched her cheek. I could sense heat in my palm. It was the residual heat from battle. This would only cool down with time. “Lily?”

Lily ran up with me and feebly hung her head. “It’s no good... I can’t do anything about this anymore.”

There was something I’d learned back in the Colony. There was no resurrection magic in this world. There was powerful healing magic that was extremely close to it, but magic couldn’t cross the boundary of death.

“Goddammit.”

I cursed and raised my head. I could see Gerbera running across the walls and ceilings with Juumonji taking chase.

“Ugh... What ridiculous strength,” she muttered.

“You annoying shit! Quit wasting my time!”

The cheater’s strength was slowly pushing Gerbera back, as terrifying as that was. Her fighting style was that of a beast to begin with. She had physical strength and reflexes none could keep up with, and she utterly crushed her opponents. In other words, she was very similar to Juumonji, who left everything to the combat abilities he was granted by this world.

With the gap in strength and speed closed, Gerbera couldn’t compensate with technique the way Shiran could. And with her threads rendered useless, it’d be difficult for her to turn things around. That didn’t mean she would go down easily, of course. Gerbera possessed amazing recovery abilities and had an abundance of combat experience.

There was no prospect of her winning like this, though. She couldn’t beat Juumonji on her own. It might’ve been possible if she worked together with Shiran, but she was dead. We had failed to make Sakagami remove the monsters, and now that Gerbera was pinned down, we were no longer able to break through the monsters surrounding the fortress. At this rate, we would truly be wiped out.

“Shiran?”

I heard a girl’s voice. I turned around and saw the Alliance Knights. They had finished defeating the monsters who’d blocked their way and managed to catch up with us. Among them, obviously, was Kei. She looked my way, but I wasn’t reflected in her eyes. She was staring at the dead girl in my arms with a vacant expression.

“Shiran!”

Kei ran over and stared at her sister, practically pushing me aside. The small girl looked down at Shiran’s face devoid of one eye and lacking any expression.

“Ah... Aaah...”

Shiran wasn't breathing, and her pulse was gone. This strict yet gentle sister of hers would never smile at her again.

"No way..."

I could see despair freezing her heart. Tears flooded her eyes, which could see nothing except for her dead sister now.

"Gaaah! You fucking pain in the ass!" Juumonji suddenly yelled.

He was getting impatient with this even battle and kicked Gerbera with all his might. Gerbera groaned in pain as she was sent flying back. Juumonji was also sent soaring backward by the recoil.

Gerbera safely landed on her eight legs and poised herself for a follow-up attack, but she wasn't Juumonji's target. I realized this right away, but she didn't.

"Oh no! Gerbera!" Lily screamed, realizing it at the same time I did.

By then, Juumonji was already moving. He turned on his heel and hurled himself forward. Gerbera's red eyes shot open.

"Dammit...!"

She was positioned on the opposite side from us with Juumonji in the middle. In other words, he'd found an opening to attack us instead of Gerbera. She likely never considered her opponent would look for the chance to target someone weaker. She was an honest girl, so her poor compatibility against a sly human was exposed here.

Furthermore, Gerbera's experience with life was awfully lopsided compared to her long years spent in isolation. She had an abundance of combat experience, but that was limited to one-sided battles. In other words, she wasn't very good at protecting someone while fighting compared to fighting all on her own.

If she were to protect us, she would have had to pay careful attention to her position at all times—not that Juumonji was someone she could fight against while doing such a thing in the first place. Actually, in this case, Shiran was the abnormal one for succeeding in doing so despite being far weaker than him.

Juumonji's large body closed in. He was aiming for me. He couldn't defeat the monster, so he decided to render her powerless by killing her master. There was no way Lily was going to let that happen, though. She jumped between us and let loose grade 3 magic. Her specialty blades of wind cut through the air.

"No way!" Lily yelled in shock.

Juumonji also unleashed grade 3 fire magic. Surprisingly, it wasn't a simple flame. He shot fiery bullets that exploded on contact. Lily's shock only stood to reason. Such strong explosions would damage this entire narrow corridor, leaving nowhere to run. It could even cause a cave in if handled poorly. But perhaps that was Juumonji's goal to begin with.

He was confident he could survive being buried alive. Fortunately, the fortress walls proved to be sturdy and withstood the force, but Lily's wind magic had been scattered. Juumonji's sturdy body barreled through the tide of flames that blew back against him, and he swooped down on her.

"Outta the way!"

Lily stepped forth to intercept him, but she couldn't hold out for even a second. Her spear met his broadsword, bent backward, and flew out of the way as his sword dug into her shoulder.

"U-Ugh..."

Carrying that momentum, his blade sank all the way to her waist, but Lily didn't give up.

"I won't...let you..."

"Wha—?!"

Even though her upper body was vertically split in two, Lily thrust out her spear. Juumonji could never expect a counterattack from such a seriously wounded opponent, so he was full of openings. Lily had an overwhelming advantage here as she drove her spear toward Juumonji's stomach.

"Ah."

But Juumonji's fist exploded into her face. Lily's head burst open like a watermelon dropped off a cliff. He pulled his sword out of her body and ran by as her body collapsed. She wasn't dead, but I could feel that her consciousness had faded through our mental path. It would take her a few seconds to reboot like this, but Juumonji was already through.

Lily wasn't weak by any metric. However, the gap between them was just too large. This was a calamity. Lily's do-or-die defense only bought a single second against this cheater. There was nothing left between Juumonji and myself.

I met his eyes. He had a scornful smile on his virile face. Knowing that Gerbera wouldn't make it in time, I bit my lip. I had to do something on my own. While I watched Lily succumb to Juumonji's attack, I'd already grabbed the dazed Kei in my arms as she continued staring at Shiran's corpse. I stretched my left arm toward the wall, then jumped back with Kei as Asarina shot out.

"Grawr!"

Ayame shot a fireball to hold him back, but Juumonji cut the projectile in two and continued closing in. A red glyph took shape in his left hand. It took him no time at all to put together grade 2 fire magic. That much I could handle. It wasn't a problem.

Just as I came to that conclusion, I felt Asarina plunging into the wall. With this, my means of evasion was ready. Or so I thought. By the time I realized my misunderstanding, it was too late. A small

explosion broke out, burning Asarina's elongated body halfway down.

"Crap!"

Juumonji's devilish smile drew closer. I had no means of dodging anymore. It was hopeless. He was going to catch me. I heard my heart thump loudly. I was going to die here. I could vividly picture a single sweep cutting my body clean in two. And it wasn't just me. Shiran's precious little sister Kei would also be killed. I failed to protect her. That outcome, though impermissible, was right before me.

I clenched my teeth hard. I couldn't possibly accept such a future.

I need to protect them, no matter what.

"Huh...?"

I strengthened my grip on my sword to put up one last vain struggle, and just then, I unintentionally let out a stupefied response. Juumonji's eyes also shot open in shock.

A hand had grabbed his shoulder from behind. It had a firm grip characteristic of those who wielded swords, yet it was so pale it was unnatural. The bloodstained fingers must have had a terrifying amount of strength in them, seeing how Juumonji's face was twisting in pain.

"H-How...are you...?"

Juumonji turned around and groaned hoarsely. What came in response...was a row of teeth tearing through his skin.

"Gyaaah?!"

Juumonji screamed. Realizing how abnormal this was, he had thrust out his arm to protect his body at the last second. The teeth sank right into his forearm. They tore through the sleeve of his blazer, gouged into his skin, and bit off his tough muscles. The sound of meat ripping apart resounded through the corridor.

"Aaaagh! Gaaaah!"

Juumonji's broadsword fell to the ground with a clang. He dropped to his knees. A good semi-spherical chunk of his forearm was missing. A wet crunch filled the air. It was the sound of something chewing meat. Everyone was left speechless, frozen by the ghastly scene.

And with a gulp, something swallowed the meat.

"Aah... Aaaaaah." A hollow groan leaked through bloodstained lips. Soon after, it turned into the shriek of the dead. "Aaaah, aaaah... AaaaAAaaAAh!"

The dead Shiran had risen to her feet and roared, not a single fragment of reason in her eye.

Chapter 9: The Master's Choice

Her body wasn't supposed to be able to move anymore. I had confirmed it for myself. She hadn't been breathing and she'd had no pulse. The majority of her blood had already spilled out. Her heart had ruptured, pierced by her own sword. Anyone would have concluded that the knight Shiran was nothing more than a butchered corpse, never to stand again.

That was supposed to be the case, but here before me, Shiran was on her feet. Not only that, her body began changing as she let out an appalling scream. Her deep wounds started filling in with swelling purple meat, almost like paste smeared over her skin. The entrails hanging from her waist slurped back into her body. Dark blood shot out of her stump of a left elbow and ate her severed forearm like a snake. The trail of blood returned to her body like a rewinding tape, placing her arm back where it belonged.

Purple meat bubbled out and reconnected the two pieces. In that instant, the ring on her finger changed from blue to yellow. That was the signal. It was proof that the elf who'd protected humanity had turned into a monster. She was now a mindless ghoul threatening the living.

All the conditions for this were indeed in place. Ghoul outbreaks depended on the density of mana in the area. On a battlefield, where the souls of the dead scattered like petals to the wind, mana would be temporarily amplified. Fort Tilia was located in the Woodlands, a region already brimming with mana. And on this day, over a thousand humans and monsters had lost their lives here. It was unmistakably a battlefield. There was no better set of conditions for a ghoul outbreak.

Even I could feel the mana floating around the fortress as her body sucked it in with terrifying force, despite the fact that I'd only learned to manipulate mana quite recently.

"Y-You bitch! How dare you..."

Juumonji's cheek convulsed with pain as he picked up his broadsword and rose to his feet. At the same time, the swelling meat pushed out the sword in Shiran's chest and it fell to the floor. She picked up the blade, then fiercely lunged in at Juumonji, who was still staggering in pain.

"Aaaaaaargh!"

She let out a roar and came down with a diagonal slash. Juumonji

caught the blow with his broadsword.

“Whoa?!”

His feet sank into the floor as he groaned in shock.

“Gaaaargh!”

Shiran followed through, turned her blade around, and then came back with a reversed slash against his blade. Juumonji’s body shook all over as he turned to block, his sword creaking from the blow.

A surging wave of offense began. Shiran didn’t show a hint of the delicate movements she had in life. Her swordsmanship was now terrifyingly violent, as if she were striking with a blunt weapon. However, her strikes also hadn’t been this forceful in life.

Perhaps that only stood to reason. She was already a monster. She existed on a separate stage from humanity now. Furthermore, although her sword skills no longer had the delicacy born of her diligent studies, the skills themselves remained drilled into her body. Her strikes were so sharp and precise that one wouldn’t think a mindless corpse was behind them.

Steel creaked. Wind cried. The living groaned. The dead screamed.

Juumonji wasn’t quietly surrendering, of course. His counterstrikes grazed Shiran’s cheek, cut apart her shoulder, and tore into her thigh.

“Aaaaaargh!”

However, Shiran didn’t care about such wounds now. She was, beyond any doubt, no more than a ghoul.

“There’s really no joining that battle, is there?”

I stood there in a daze as Gerbera, who had been fighting Juumonji moments ago, struck up a conversation with me. Lily also came over after properly reforming her smashed head.

“Sorry. My mistake exposed you to danger, My Lord.”

“It’s fine. Forget about it. More importantly, would you be able to support Shiran somehow?”

“That might be difficult. I do not want this opportunity to slip us by, but...” Gerbera knit her graceful brows as she watched the fierce crossing of swords between Juumonji and Shiran. “No matter how you look at it, she can no longer distinguish between friend and foe. It’s clear that fighting shoulder to shoulder with her would result in naught but my shoulder being bitten off.”

I couldn’t really refute her reasoning.

“Gaaaaaargh!”

Shiran lacked any sense of reason. The reach of her blade would undoubtedly reduce anyone to minced meat, which she’d then devour greedily. There was no way of fighting alongside her.

“Takahiro!”

“Commander...”

Seeing that this was a good opportunity, the commander came running over with her knights. Spotting Gerbera, she looked to be on guard, but an instant later she changed gears, deciding now wasn't the time to be worrying about that.

“Let us retreat while we have the chance.”

“But Shiran...”

“That isn't Shiran. Don't misunderstand. It's nothing more than an undead monster now.”

The commander's opinion was to the point, demonstrating her long years of experience fighting in the Woodlands. She had probably experienced this situation more than she wanted to already.

She's right. That isn't Shiran... It was just a monster moving her corpse. Shiran was dead. That was the end of it. Even if she was standing and moving...it was just an undead monster. That much was common sense in this world.

“What shall we do, My Lord?” Gerbera asked. “Just as she says, we can escape now. Or do you wish to avenge her? If so, we could wait until that ghoul has reached its limits and exhausts Juumonji. This is a hard fight, even for him. He'll definitely become fatigued after continuous battling. That should be more than enough for me to defeat him.”

Juumonji's wounds were in fact multiplying. He'd managed to fend off the initial bite with his arm, but he was likely regretting that mistake now. What's more, being attacked by the corpse of someone who was supposed to be dead, someone he'd killed with his very own hands, summoned a primordial fear within him. Juumonji's strikes were clearly weaker than before. Not only that, the undead monster ignored anything other than a lethal blow, continuously driving in with strikes of its own. Not even a cheater could get away from such an opponent unscathed.

Shiran was of course getting hit all over, but she wasn't even bleeding. Swelling purple meat instantly covered any damage. The wounds she'd suffered in life remained scarred, but all these new ones eventually smoothed out into regular skin.

This must have been a special characteristic of the undead monster she was now. Such regeneration was naturally accomplished through the use of mana. She was sure to keep fighting until she ran out of fuel. Just as Gerbera had said, we had more than enough time to run away, and if we wanted to counterattack, Juumonji would be weakened by the time he won.

“What shall we do?” Gerbera asked.

Fight and take revenge, or...

I closed my eyes for a single instant. I could see her smile on the

back of my eyelids. I could hear the screams of the dead assaulting my ears.

I set my heart on what I wanted to do and opened my eyes. Now that I had made my decision, I naturally knew the right thing to do. All that was left was to accomplish it...no matter what happened as a result.

“Commander. Would you mind answering a question?”

“Huh? A question?”

The commander looked perplexed, but I asked anyway.

“Shiran looks different from a normal ghoul to me. Do you have any idea why that might be?”

“Different...how?”

“I once encountered knights who’d turned into ghouls. They couldn’t restore their wounded bodies like that, let alone wield a sword.”

“Wait. What does this have to do with...?”

“Please just answer me. It’s important.” I made it quite clear I wouldn’t take no for an answer.

The commander hesitated but answered me regardless of her confusion. “It’s known that on rare occasions, ghouls will exhibit such transformations.”

“Rare, is it? Do most cases involve famous knights, warriors, and mages? For example...like the Undead King Carl?”

This name came from a legend Kei had once told me about. It was a story of a nation that excelled in magic and whose king turned into a lich—an undead monster—upon his lover’s death. It was said that he maintained his intelligence through sheer willpower.

“That’s a fairy tale.”

“Yes, I know. It’s thought of as a fairy tale.”

Undead monsters couldn’t maintain their will from when they were alive. Although they were originally humans, they were monsters, after all. Monsters didn’t possess wills. That was common sense here. That was why the legend of the Undead King Carl was nothing more than a fairy tale.

I knew differently, however. Monsters who possessed wills did in fact exist. As such, there was a possibility that undead monsters could maintain their wills. If the legend of the Undead King Carl truly described events from the past...

“So, how about it? Do the people who become these rare specimens of ghouls show any kind of trend?”

“There are very few examples to begin with...so you can’t really call it a trend...” the commander started, looking up at the ceiling as if searching her memories. “It’s certainly true that a few exceptions occurred when exceptional knights were lost. Ghoul outbreaks among

a company of knights is considered a scandal, though, so they weren't left in official records."

"I see. Thank you for letting me know," I said with a nod. I looked over to the ongoing battle between Shiran and Juumonji.

"Master, are you planning to...?" Lily said, guessing what I was getting at. "Is that even possible?"

"Yeah."

This was my power. I could tell by instinct whether something was possible. I turned back to the commander, who had no idea what was going on, and cut straight to the chase.

"It's possible to get Shiran back."

"Wha—?!"

"Really?!"

The commander was speechless, while Kei, who had been hanging her head this entire time, reacted vividly.

"Is that true, Takahiro?! Can you really revive my sister?!"

"Unfortunately, I can't revive her." I caught Kei as she jumped up at me and shook my head. "However, I might be able to return her heart and mind to the undead monster she has become."

"Wh-What do you mean?" Kei asked, her eyes darting about in confusion.

"Oh yeah, I haven't told you how my ability works yet, have I? My power doesn't merely subdue monsters to do my bidding. By connecting my heart to theirs, I can give these girls a will."

"Does that mean...?"

Kei's eyes were sparkling with hope and understanding. I gave her a nod. Shiran was a monster now, meaning she was a valid target for my ability. I could connect to her heart.



“It does have its limits, though,” I added.

My power couldn't create something from nothing. I couldn't grant a monster a heart if it didn't have the groundings for one to sprout from, so it was important that this undead monster possess even a fragment of Shiran's original will. There was no real reason for me to worry about this, though. I was convinced.

“Kei, both you and I are still alive because Shiran awakened as an undead monster. That was no coincidence.”

Shiran turned into a monster the moment Kei and I were in grave danger. Such a convenient coincidence didn't exist in this irrational world.

“Shiran's desire to protect others stirred up her corpse. Even if she lost her sense of reason, she hasn't lost her heart. I should be able to recover it.”

According to the legend of the Undead King Carl, he was an outstanding mage with tenacious willpower. If these were the conditions for becoming an undead with a will, then Shiran, an outstanding spiritualist who'd continuously fought while harboring such a strong desire to protect others, met those conditions perfectly. The one fighting here right now wasn't some nameless undead monster. It was Shiran. The girl who had gallantly stood in battle, resolved for death, was now continuing her fight beyond life.

This was all because she wanted to protect someone. That single desire drove her. There was another reason I knew her heart was still intact, though. When Asarina had been burned and I'd lost my emergency means of evasion, for a single instant, when I could clearly see my impending doom, I definitely heard her.

“I need to protect them, no matter what.”

There was no mistaking it. That was Shiran's voice. Perhaps her emotions had synchronized with mine when I faced the same threat she had challenged. For just that moment, I was connected to her through the mental path. Perhaps because an undead monster was a bit special, the mental path was cut off now. If I could properly reconnect it, though, I was sure my voice would reach her.

“But to do that, I'll need to touch her.”

According to my experiences up until now, the mental path, the true nature of my ability, was stronger the closer I was to my target. If I could directly touch her skin, then I'd be able to reach her heart. However, that also meant interfering in Shiran and Juumonji's fight.

“In other words, it's our turn, right?” Lily said, spinning her spear and exchanging glances with Gerbera. “I'll pin down Shiran so that our master can touch her.”

“In the meantime, I am to face off against that man. Very well. I

shall not fail as I did before.”

Gerbera’s lips curved upward as her legs skittered about. A warlike smile prefaced her rematch. I smiled myself, seeing such a reassuring reaction from her, then gently pushed Kei away from me.

“Um...Takahiro.” She resisted ever so slightly and grabbed the hem of my clothes with her tiny hands. “Please take care of my sister.”

I smiled and brushed her head.

“Leave it to me.”

Chapter 10: The World of Light

Unlike with monsters, we couldn't possibly ask the knights to face off against Juumonji. We couldn't afford more needless casualties, so I asked them all to back off. I had Ayame go with them just in case. Kei held the tiny bodyguard in her arms as Ayame's fluffy tail wagged vigorously about. She was telling me to leave it to her.

The commander gave me a courteous bow, while Mikihiko stood next to her and gave me a thumbs-up before they both turned on their heels. The knights followed them, one of them carrying the unconscious Sakagami. He had passed out, unable to bear the pain from his injuries, so the knights had been able to secure him. We didn't know what would happen if we left him at large while we tried to save Shiran, so although I'd had no choice but to kill him just a few moments ago, the situation was different now that the knights could restrain and watch him. We could possibly still get more information out of him.

In any case, that was a matter for later. I saw the knights off, then turned around. Shiran was forcing Juumonji away from our position with her fierce attacks, a result of the feelings she harbored.

Shiran's strong desire was definitely confining Juumonji's irrational violence. I didn't want her precious sentiments to burn out like a shooting star. I took a deep breath, made my resolve, and called out to my companions.

"Okay, let's go."

If I could connect to Shiran through the mental path and retake her heart, we could join forces to defeat Juumonji. Considering Shiran's own distinctive characteristics and this immense battlefield that had turned her into an undead monster, there would likely never be another opportunity like this where all the circumstances lined up.

My job here was to touch Shiran to connect us. Lily and Gerbera were to put all their strength into creating that opening. Our operation started. Gerbera took the fore. She folded in her legs, sank close to the ground, and leaped. The large spider turned into a white cannonball and forced her way into the fight between savior and ghoul.

"Shyaaah!"

Juumonji turned around in shock as Gerbera's powerful kick came flying in. I thought that maybe things would end right there, but that was far too optimistic. Juumonji managed to block the blow using his

broadsword at the last second.

“Ugh! Y-You again?!”

Having said that, even a warrior like Juumonji couldn't dig in and withstand the full force of Gerbera's momentum. Gerbera sent him flying back, tearing him away from Shiran just like we planned. That was only half of the plan, though.

Gerbera had thrust herself between two raging beasts, so to speak. If she paid too much attention to one, she'd be too slow to react against the other. As she was now, Shiran had no sense of reason. She couldn't distinguish between friend and foe even as she stood against Juumonji so that we could get away. Her single eye could only see us as obstacles that hindered her from devouring him.

“Graaaagh!”

Shiran's blade severed one of Gerbera's legs. She had already struck again by the time Gerbera managed to react, stopping the sword after it dug into an area of Gerbera's carapace that was particularly thick. This was enough to stop the blade, but not its owner. Shiran pulled out the sword with all her strength and lunged at Gerbera using her own body.

The sound of her teeth snapping shut rang out. My blood ran cold. Gerbera managed to grab Shiran's forehead and force her back right before the ghoulish tore into her carotid artery. Her other hand grabbed the blade of the sword coming down at her. Blood dribbled from her palm and fell to the floor.

“One and a half legs and a hand, huh? It matters not.”

Gerbera flashed a beautiful smile that had me charmed for a moment. The heat of battle made this girl shine like no other. Even her flowing blood seemed to vividly color her beauty.

“I shall forgive it, so you should do likewise. Worry not, your body won't care about a broken spine at this point.”

Using the grip she had on Shiran's face, Gerbera flung her full force. A crunch echoed through the corridor as Shiran's neck broke from the stress. Her body violently tumbled across the ground. Gerbera, meanwhile, didn't even watch as she turned around and charged at Juumonji.

“I'm getting sick of you...” he grumbled.

“Likewise, but I'll be your opponent. Do keep me company!”

I had to accomplish my own task while Gerbera kept Juumonji at bay. Lily and I ran to where Shiran crashed. Her body had bounced off the ground and was now twirling through the air, her limbs broken from the impact. At a glance, her regenerative abilities as an undead monster even surpassed Gerbera. Such wounds would heal quickly. Still, she shouldn't be able to prepare herself for battle with broken limbs. Her sword was no longer in her hand. This was a once-in-a-

lifetime chance.

“Hyaaaah!”

Lily lunged forward and caught Shiran with her spear. The point went right through Shiran’s thigh and stabbed into the ground, sealing her movements. This still wasn’t enough to stop the dead, though.

“Graaaaargh!”

Even with all her broken bones, Shiran forced her muscles to move. She attacked Lily with snakelike movements. If Lily were human, this would’ve ended things. Or perhaps if Shiran still had her sense of reason, she wouldn’t have been caught by such a simple trick.

“I’ve got you now,” Lily said with a satisfied smile.

Shiran came biting in, but Lily’s face crumbled away. She undid her mimicry and enveloped Shiran within her slimy body. By the time I caught up, Shiran was squirming about as if drowning within Lily’s half-viscous form. Even with her abnormal physical strength, she couldn’t get out with her arms and legs broken. Lily couldn’t restrain her for long, but this was more than enough.

“Shiran...”

I ran up to them and immediately stretched out my hand to Shiran. The only portion of her that remained outside Lily’s body was her face. I went to touch her cheek. Taking a closer look, I saw the scars on her purple skin. They looked painful...and the moment that came to mind, gold covered my entire vision.

“Get out of the way, Master!” Lily screamed, having hastily reconstructed her upper body.

Lily’s body fluid splashed against my face. I realized the gold covering my eyes was Shiran’s long blonde hair. To think she would shrug off Lily’s hold with her body in such a state...

“G-Gah?!”

I didn’t really have the time to be thinking of such things as I writhed in pain. Thanks to the repeated damage to her body, the lack of time to restore herself, and Lily’s hold on her, Shiran’s movements had been dulled. Her attack missed its mark. Instead, she sank her teeth somewhere between my neck and left shoulder.

“Ugh...”

A sharp pain ran through my brain. Despite the mana strengthening it, my body was still so fragile. Her teeth crunched their way into my muscles. The feeling of being eaten alive sent shivers down my skin.

“U-Urgh...!”

I swallowed my urge to scream and clenched my teeth. I forced the convulsing muscles on my face to move...and smiled.

This was nothing. Our plan was a success. I only had to touch her to connect the mental path to Shiran. But the deeper the touch, the

deeper the connection. And this was so much more than a light tap. Shiran's teeth were digging into my body. She was swallowing a part of me. This wasn't even just a matter of being in contact anymore. Our blood was mixed. Our very existences entwined with each other deeper than any embrace, bringing our hearts closer than any other action could.

And then...my consciousness faded away. My very being sank into the depths. I didn't resist the familiar sensation and simply continued sinking deeper and deeper.

Now then, let's go take back what I lost.



Before I knew it, I was floating in darkness. It was like I had sunken deep into the ocean. Everything around me was pitch black. I couldn't see a thing. I couldn't touch a thing. My body didn't even exist here to begin with.

This realization was a big difference from the last time I was here. I suddenly came to an understanding. With no body, I couldn't see; I couldn't stretch out my hand to touch anything. This was a bit of a problem, however.

I didn't wander in here meaninglessly. I came here looking for something. I couldn't accomplish my goal without seeing anything. I tried sharpening my senses to somehow see within this deep darkness.

It was like I was trying to become a light to cast away the shadows. In the next instant, I turned into a pale blue flame, floating in the middle of this pitch black world. The human-sized blaze swayed about and scattered embers in all directions. That was when I first noticed there were several other flames floating about.

There was a quietly burning red flame, an energetic but smaller flame, a flame that was both red and blue, and a large white flame. There were countless other lights floating in the darkness, but unfortunately, I could neither see nor sense them. They weren't within the range of my own illumination. In short, this pale light was both my sense of vision and my sense of touch here.

It was a mysterious place. I tried stretching out my arms, causing pale embers to scatter, stretching my flame into the darkness. The light split in two, and I could now see my hands in front of me. It was a strange sensation. It wasn't like seeing things with my eyes at all. If it were, maybe it wouldn't have felt so strange.

Perhaps that was why I found something out of place with these two protruding lights. Looking closer, I could see there was something quite interesting there: a small crack on my left hand.

The pale flame actually had miniscule fissures running down it, fissures I could only see by straining my "eyes." And as I stared in

fixation at my own existence, I realized there was another red flame mixed within my blue one.

I wondered what it was. It was rather curious, but I wouldn't get anywhere by pondering over it. It wasn't like I could grasp what exactly this place was by thinking about it. However, though I didn't understand it, I knew instinctively that I had to come here to fulfill my goal. I even knew what I had to do. So that was enough for me. I changed gears and got to work.

I headed further down toward what I was looking for. A trail of blood much like a thin red thread guided me to my destination. I gradually sank into the depths of the darkness. This space was endlessly vast. I couldn't even imagine how far it went. Perhaps the concept of a boundary didn't even exist here.

On that point, it was fortunate I already knew where my goal was. It made the painful experience I went through earlier worth it. I didn't know when this connection would be severed though, so I had to hurry up.

Sinking, sinking, sinking, just sinking away.

Eventually, the other flames around me were no longer visible. The darkness grew thicker and thicker, feeling like it had a physical weight to it now. It was like the overwhelming darkness was trying to snuff out my tiny little flame. I suppressed my urge to resurface immediately, swallowed my own fear, and pushed on deeper.

Before long, I found what I was looking for. It was a violently burning yellow light, the blaze of Shiran's projection. I felt joy for a moment, but then I suddenly grimaced. The image of her cradling her knees with her eyes closed pained me terribly.

The wounds from Juumonji's attacks had carved cracks all over her entire body. Quite a few of them were so deep it was better to call them rifts. Even now, her wounded projection continued sinking deeper into the darkness. Slowly, yet surely...

The deeper she sank, the more the cracks multiplied, the more profound the rifts became, and the more fragments broke and floated off into this vast space. She was like a lump of salt dissolving in water, breaking down into tiny pieces and vanishing into nothingness.

Her light blazed brightly as if resisting such a fate. This glimmering combustion was none other than a manifestation of her will.

"I can't disappear yet. I have things I still need to protect."

That single thought maintained her projection here, regardless of the fact that it should have crumbled into the void of this darkness long ago. Upon closer inspection, there was something else mixed into her light.

They were all fragments, miniscule and with no definitive form

like hers. A tremendous number of them were fixed inside Shiran's light and burning fiercely. I could sense an independent will within each of them. These were perhaps fragments of emotions from all the people who had lost their lives fighting to protect Fort Tilia.

Shiran had turned into an undead monster by devouring the mana that filled the fortress. That mana came from the scattered souls of the soldiers and knights who died protecting it. It wasn't all that strange for their feelings to remain in miniscule quantities.

In that case, Shiran was a crystallization of the noble desire to protect others. I couldn't possibly allow her to lose this in the form of a pitiful ghoul, no matter the cost. I renewed my resolve and stretched out my hand to her burning projection. I knew what had to be done to recover the girl in front of me. We could use the inherent power we called cheats, which they called blessings, as naturally as breathing. That didn't change even in this inexplicable place. I stretched out my fingers and touched her shoulder.

A small fissure ran down my hand with a crack. I gulped, but a part of my brain remained calm and looked at the scene before me. It was just as I had thought. For a single instant, I stiffened up. I felt shock, but this was what I expected from the very beginning.

This was my power. I knew by instinct whether something was possible. I knew other things about it too, of course. The moment I'd decided to retake Shiran's heart, I'd had a bad premonition. Regardless, I'd resolved myself to do it.

I'd decided I would accomplish what I had set out to do, no matter what. There was no turning back now. I had no reason to stop my hand. I wrapped my arms around her without hesitation. At the same time, my own flame spread out and enveloped her light.

With that, the crumbling of her projection slowed down considerably. It seemed to be going well. I felt a sense of relief wash over me...as I heard screams from my entire body.

The surface of my projection was cracking all over, as if it couldn't withstand the pressure of the depths. It was the same as when I touched her shoulder with my finger. I had touched something that wasn't meant to be touched, so maybe this was perfectly normal.

This wouldn't prove fatal, however. Unlike Shiran's, the cracks running down my body were shallow and didn't cause my projection to crumble away. My life wasn't at threat, probably. Still, there were things that couldn't be regained, even if it wasn't fatal. This was a one-way road, so to speak. After taking one step in and looking back, there was no longer a path behind me. If I continued down my current trajectory, there was no guarantee I wouldn't end up falling into the pits of hell.

That basically summed up what was happening to my body.

Nevertheless, I didn't consider letting Shiran go. I didn't want to lose her. My feelings were strong...

Why did I feel so strongly about taking her back, anyway? Was it because she believed in me when I was nothing more than an alien to this world? That was certainly true. It was one reason for my feelings. I knew it wasn't the only reason, however.

When I closed my eyes, I could see her standing against Juumonji. She was the knight who had continued to fight with the desire to protect someone in her heart, even in death. Her way of life proved this wasn't a world dominated only by strength.

Juumonji and Sakagami had mercilessly killed Kudou Riku, the bullied kid whom Sakagami had dragged along and tyrannized even before coming to Fort Tilia. Kudou had once told me this world was one where the strong did whatever they wanted. His tone had sounded completely resigned, and I was unable to object at the time. Such tyranny had also trampled me, after all. In a sense, Kudou was like my reflection. But Shiran's existence proved that such cruelty wasn't all there was to this world.

These powers that were given to us out of nowhere, that contained no feelings or emotions, had cruelly destroyed the Colony. Now they trampled over Fort Tilia. Such rampaging strength certainly brought many to ruin. That was true. However, the feelings of the weak weren't so powerless that they simply let themselves be trampled down.

If I could use my power to retake Shiran, who had proven this very fact, such a price was trivial. I held her in my arms and rose from the darkness.

Splashes continuously resounded as we moved higher and higher. We were supposed to be going up, but I felt like I was falling. I was going down a one-way staircase, step, by step, by step. Down, and down, and down...

"Do you understand, My Lord?"

Words that had been said to me suddenly came to mind.

"That is a tremendously dangerous train of thought. Even I can easily imagine it. If you try and bear everything on your own like that..."

She did have a point there, but I didn't plan on yielding. Thinking back on it, the moment I decided to shelter Katou might've also been like this. Even though I knew it was inconvenient, I decided to protect her so I could protect that "something" within me. This was the same.

I was similar to Juumonji. I had been pulled into this world and given a power out of the blue. At first, I didn't know of this power within me, having been nothing more than a member of the home team with no chance of encountering any monsters. But as I lay on the verge of death, I fortuitously met Lily and realized I had the ability to

tame monsters. At the time, I thought this power was so I could survive on my own in this cruel world.

Back then, it was merely a convenience. However, I was able to meet Lily and the others thanks to this power. The bonds I'd formed with them were more precious than anything else.

That was why the following thought came to mind. This power was certainly an empty thing with no feelings or emotions within it—at first. It was more than that now. It was filled with the feelings of my servants. That was what I believed, what I wanted to believe.

And here, there was something I keenly wished to recover using this power. Betraying such a wish would be similar to denying the feelings charged within it. I couldn't allow that to happen no matter what.

“Takahiro?”

A girl's voice reached my ears as I continued my ascent. I looked down at the projection of Shiran in my arms, and she faintly opened her one remaining eye. That eye, filled with a boundless light, recognized my existence. In that instant, the mental path between us took on a firm shape. Or perhaps it was the opposite. The mental path took on a firm shape, which caused her to awaken.

As proof of this, the change happening to my body started to settle down. The crumbling of Shiran's body calmed down as well. The color of her light also turned from yellow to red.

“Where...? Why am I...?”

Shiran spoke in a trance. Her consciousness was still fuzzy, and her eye was shaking like a trembling wave. To her, this probably looked like nothing more than a dream. That was the sort of place it was, and her state before waking up was pretty bad.

“Oh. I see. I used up all my strength and broke.”

The girl who had lost an eye smiled dryly. A single tear ran down her cracked cheek.

“Once again, I couldn't protect what I had to.”

A single image from her fully exposed heart flowed into me through the mental path. It was a picture of a young man who somewhat resembled Shiran, dying within the forest. A young girl was wailing on her knees in front of him.

That was all I saw, but it was enough to feel a sorrow that felt like it would tear apart my heart. This was presumably Shiran's memory from when she first decided she would take up a sword and protect others. She had used her great loss as a starting point and walked down the path of constant battle, hoping to decrease the number of tragedies in this world, even if only by one instance.

The path she walked was cut off halfway, and now she once more cried at her own powerlessness. Everything started with tears, and

now it ended with tears. It was far too tragic.

“Don’t give up, Shiran. It isn’t over yet.”

“Taka...hiro...?”

As I continued to ascend, I saw the lights that were present when I had first entered this space. It was just a little further now.

“Let’s go back, Shiran. Kei is waiting.”

Shiran looked taken aback. She definitely didn’t believe me. But now that we were tied by the mental path, she could sense that I was telling the truth. Her eye shook like the surface of a lake. This time, her tears weren’t from sorrow. This was more than enough for me to feel that my decision wasn’t a mistake.

I joined the other flames with Shiran.

Light filled my entire consciousness and blinded me.

Then, I returned to the real world.

Chapter 11: She Who Crushes Such Empty Power

After ascending from the darkness, my consciousness returned to my body. It felt like I'd been inside that mysterious space for a long time, but it had only been a short while in the real world. I looked over Shiran, her teeth still cutting into my shoulder, and spotted Lily, who had reconstructed her body into that of a human.

"M-Master!"

"I'm fine... It went well."

Lily looked truly relieved to hear that. I returned my gaze to Shiran. I had embraced her body unconsciously when she attacked me, and she was now leaning against me weakly. From the side, it looked like we were lovers, sharing a hug as she buried her face in my shoulder. In truth, this scene was nowhere near that beautiful. She was in the middle of eating me. It was actually rather grotesque.

"Ow..."

I let out a small groan. Shiran pulled her teeth out of my muscles as a damp sound licked my ear. This pain was of course necessary for her to get away from me. I unwrapped my arms from around her back.

Several seconds later, I was left in confusion. I'd thought Shiran would back off immediately, but she showed no signs of moving. She was no longer biting me, but her arms were still wrapped around me. She had quite the unexpected hold on me too, so I couldn't get away.

She laid perfectly still, her face still buried in my shoulder. Was something wrong with her? The moment that thought crossed my mind, I felt a lapping sensation near the open wound. I could hear the slight splashing of a sticky liquid as if a cat was drinking milk.

"Huh...?"

I couldn't tell if the goosebumps running down my back were chills of fear or pleasure. Now we truly looked like lovers. Her tongue crawled along my skin. Diligently. Teasingly. There was an obscenity to her actions, as if she were a seductress, yet also an innocent passion to them, like a puppy. The sound of lapping continued filling the air as she pecked, tasted, and licked away. Yes, Shiran was enthusiastically licking away all the blood flowing out of my wound.

My thoughts came to a complete and utter halt as she gradually drew back. Her glazed eye, her smiling lips, the red blood wetting her

mouth...she seemed entranced, an expression unbefitting of this girl's serious nature. Her pale complexion was almost ghastly, but it was accompanied by a strange sexiness suitable for a girl her age.

Her tongue peeked out from her lips and licked away the blood staining her mouth as if savoring the sweetest of honey.

"Fwah..."

A vacant voice crept into my ear. Even this sounded lustful. If her usual self was a sweet wildflower, then right now she was more of a bewitching flytrap. She had a sweet and alluring beauty paired with a fleeting yet dangerous atmosphere. It felt like she could vanish at any moment, which made it impossible for me to tear my eyes away from her.

"Heh. Heheh..."

Her single eye looked at me with a melted gaze, and then...a switch flipped within her.

"Huh...?"

She sounded perplexed. I could tell from both her expression and the mental path that she had come to her senses. At the same time, my frozen sense of time began moving again. I finally realized I had stopped breathing entirely.

"Sh-Shiran? Are you...awake?"

Shiran blinked a few times, her now clean lips trembling with a twitch.

"Taka...hiro?"

She replied with a slightly childish lisp, but she could at least properly recognize who I was now.

"Wh-Where...?"

Shiran slowly became more levelheaded. She looked down at her own hand as if to confirm her situation.

"It can't be... Have I truly returned?"

Her lips trembled as she spoke clear and meaningful words. The light of reason dwelled deep within her eye. She was no longer uncertain.



“Thank goodness. You’ve come to,” I said with relief.

Judging from what I saw, she had still been in an ambiguous state where her ego had yet to return, so she was still acting somewhat like a ghoul. It had my blood running cold for a moment, but now it looked like things were okay.

“Takahiro!”

After gazing at her own hand, Shiran raised her face. Her eye shone like a one-of-a-kind jewel. I was now captivated by her radiance in an entirely different way from before.

“Thank you so very much, Takahiro!”

She tightly grasped my hand. I lowered my gaze to her dreadfully cold fingers, spotting a ring with a red gem. This ring was proof she was a knight and also an identifier for whether or not she was a ghoul. When she came back to us, the color had apparently changed. It hadn’t gone back to its original blue, probably because she was still an undead monster, even if not a ghoul.

“With this, I can fight once more. I can protect what I wanted to protect...!”

Nevertheless, it didn’t change that this was Shiran. I finally had a true sense that she had regained her heart. A smile naturally came to me. The precious feelings this girl possessed were no longer lost. For now, that was worth celebrating.

“All of this, every last bit, is thanks to you, Takahiro,” she said, overcome with emotion.

“No, that’s not quite right,” I replied, shaking my head. I looked into her teary eye, then quoted, ““This is the world where wishes come true.””

“...?”

“You told me this before, remember? Those were the words left behind by the very first savior, I think.”

Legends told of the first savior saying this to encourage the people not to throw away their dreams in the darkest period of humanity. This was, of course, only an interpretation of that phrase, just as Shiran had said before. It happened so long ago and was such a simple phrase that there was no longer any way of finding out the truth behind it.

However, such a gentle interpretation continued to support this stout-hearted girl to this day as she protected humanity. There was no phrase more appropriate than this here and now.

“The power I had wasn’t enough. Just hoping for it to happen wouldn’t allow me to reach you. But if wishes come true here...then your own wish, as well as those of all the people who tried to protect this fortress, are what made this possible.”

Shiran was right here as a crystallization of everyone's wishes. It was a little wrong to claim that as my personal accomplishment.

"All of our wishes..." Shiran muttered, closing her eye. Then she joined her hands to mine and looked me in the eyes. "You're right," she said with a beautiful smile. "This could be a miracle we all brought forth together... But still, that is exactly why I must thank you, Takahiro." I could once more see my reflection in her gem-like eye. "Thank you very much for picking up all of our wishes. Thank you for saving mine. You would surely deny it, but at the very least, to me, you are..."

Shiran swallowed her next words and shook her head. Her expression then changed to that of a knight continuing to fight to protect the world.

"For the sake of everybody's feelings...and to fulfill my own desire, I must fight. Let's go, Takahiro. Onward to our battlefield."

With the brilliance of her vow to protect those who'd been hurt remaining just as it was, the knight Shiran was reborn here and now as an undead monster.



I wanted to celebrate our reunion. I wanted to better feel what we had retaken. However, the situation wouldn't allow for that.

"Yeah. Let's fight together. Do you need an explanation of what's going on?" I asked Shiran as she let go of my hand.

"No. I have a general grasp of the situation." Shiran's eye followed my hand, then she shook her head. "When you held me in your arms in that peculiar world, everything was largely conveyed to me."

"I guess it's a little late to ask, but do you remember what happened in there?"

"Yes. Although, it didn't feel real, almost like a dream... Still, that was no dream, was it? If so, my course of action has already been decided."

Shiran turned around and looked down the corridor. Beyond the hazy flames and dust in the air, a battle was unfolding as spider threads and fire magic flew about between Gerbera and Juumonji.

Shiran had lost to him once already. After such a cruel defeat, one would typically freeze at the thought of facing the same challenge again. Normally, one would never know what a killing blow to the heart felt like, so it made me worry about her even more.

There was no fear in Shiran's gaze, however. Her eye remained steadfast and didn't waver in the least. With this, she wouldn't have a single problem crossing swords with Juumonji.

"Just as you can see...Gerbera, my servant, the white arachne, is facing off against Juumonji now."

Even though she knew her threads had little effect against Juumonji's specialty fire magic, Gerbera still used them frequently as the battle unfolded. This fighting style was something we had discussed beforehand. Our goal was to get Juumonji to use as much fire magic as possible. The plan was going pretty well. With all the explosions and flames about, he hadn't noticed what we were up to. The walls of the corridor were starting to collapse, though. Maybe she was overdoing it a little. Gerbera's success was worthy of praise regardless. Still, this couldn't go on forever.

"It'll be difficult even for her to defeat Juumonji alone. If the fight keeps going, she might be struck down instead. Sorry to rush you, but can you help Gerbera?"

"Very well," Shiran said with a nod, smiling slightly. "But to think I will be fighting shoulder to shoulder with a legendary horror. Life is full of unexpected events. Oh, not that I'm alive anymore."

"She's my precious companion. She's actually pretty cute in certain ways."

"Cute...?"

Shiran's eye widened like a saucer, apparently finding my comment unexpected. If all I had ever seen of the white arachne was her ferocity and beauty, I would undoubtedly think the same.

"Yeah. Given the opportunity, I hope you can get along with her."

We had to fight now so that such an opportunity would present itself in the future. I faced the battlefield, and then...

"H-Huh...?"

My vision warped as I felt the world spinning around me. I was suddenly assaulted by a serious dizzy spell. I couldn't even keep to my feet.

"Master?!"

"Takahiro!"

I fell to my butt as their screams resounded around me. A strange lethargy assaulted my entire body. I wasn't able to get back to my feet right away. Lily ran over in a fluster and began casting healing magic. The blood coming out of the bite wound on my shoulder stopped. A few seconds later, my dizziness subsided.

"Master. What happened...?" Lily asked with a worried expression.

"Aah, it's nothing... I might've pushed myself too hard is all."

I recalled the cracks running down my projection within that mysterious space. I didn't know what exactly they were, but making Shiran into my servant through abnormal means definitely put some sort of burden on my very existence. It wasn't all that strange for this to manifest as dizziness.

Or perhaps this was caused by my stamina depleting? Even though I'd learned to use mana and could handle some overexertion,

today had been a nonstop series of events. There was also the blood loss from my shoulder wound. It seemed reasonable that I'd hit my limit here.

I borrowed Lily's hand to stand back up as Shiran turned an anxious gaze my way.

"Takahiro. Please leave the rest to me. You should—"

"No, I can't back down now."

I was grateful for her consideration, but I shook my head. I wasn't just being stubborn. The only ones who could face off directly against Juumonji were Shiran and Gerbera. Still, I was a little worried about how well they could work together on the spot. They needed someone who could connect them.

"More importantly, Shiran." Fortunately, my sudden dizzy attack was fleeting. I could stand on my own. I refused Lily's hand as she gave me a worried look, then continued to confirm what I needed to. "Can you fight properly? Your circumstances are...a little different from before, I think."

"That's true."

Shiran traced her right hand down the scar on her left arm and then touched her face as if covering the deep cut that had destroyed her right eye. She brought her palm back down and opened and closed her hands a few times. After tightly clenching her fists, she stopped repeating the action.

"My once severed arm shows no hindrance in movement. The great elevation of my physical strength seems to have remained. The balance is pretty poor, but if I move with the same senses as when I borrow the help of the four sprites, I should be able to manage. As for magic...especially my power as a spiritualist, it seems it'd be better not to use any. The nature of my mana has changed, after all. I don't know what will happen as I am now."

"Can you fight...?" I asked in a worried tone.

Shiran smiled. "Of course. It is for that purpose that I received your help and returned from the land of the dead." Her words were reassuring. I had asked a foolish question. "Please leave it to me... No, that's not quite the right way to put it, is it now? Let's fight together, Takahiro."

"You got it, Shiran. Let's end this tragedy right here."

Many lives had been lost in this conflict that began with the invasion of a large monster army. The main cause behind it all, Juumonji, definitely needed to be stopped right here and now. To do that, we each had to muster the last of our strength. This was to be the last battle to take place here in Fort Tilia.



“Onward then.”

Shiran stepped forth, picked up her fallen sword, and ran down the corridor. She was headed straight toward the battlefield where a boy armed with a broadsword clashed against the Great White Spider.

Gerbera quickly noticed her fellow servant approaching and smiled slightly.

“So you’ve come, little girl.”

“I shall lend you my support!”

Shiran charged in and slashed horizontally at Juumonji. Just as she’d claimed, there was no uncertainty in her movements from her first step to the swing of her blade. She could wield her sword without being unbalanced by her sudden elevation in physical strength.

Juumonji blocked the blow, but his eyes shot open in shock. “What the...?! Y-You again?! You’re completely different?!” He took a large leap back, utterly confused.

“Indeed. I have died once already, but I’ve come to help put an end to your meaningless violence!”

“What the hell...? How is a ghoul...? No way!” Juumonji groaned, but then he realized I was standing a little further away. “Majima! Your spider barging in was to buy time for this?!”

“Gerbera! Leave the front to Shiran!” I said, not caring about Juumonji’s rambling.

“Mrgh... If that is My Lord’s command, then so shall it be.” She looked reluctant, but she obeyed my instructions and took a step back. “Muster your courage, little girl, for you are the shining star of this battle.”

“That goes without saying!”

Shiran slashed at Juumonji, her strikes fierce. Her steps broke the stone floor underneath her, and her blade ran through the air as if to cut the world itself. She had more pure strength as a mindless ghoul, but her physical abilities still surpassed those of any human. They were far beyond what she was capable of in life. She had shortened the huge gap between herself and Juumonji in terms of simple specs.

She was even adjusting to her delicate sword skills. She hadn’t fully regained them, but she could still wield a sword better than Juumonji could. Furthermore, Shiran had one other major advantage over Juumonji: her wounds were recovering rapidly.

As an undead monster, Shiran’s regeneration abilities went well beyond the norm. In contrast, Juumonji was still suffering from multiple wounds, including the missing chunk of his arm that Shiran had bitten off. He was perfectly capable of using healing magic, but it seemed he wasn’t good enough to treat himself in the midst of battle.

Juumonji likely never considered anyone would put up this much resistance after he killed Watanabe. There weren’t supposed to be any

humans here who could withstand the harsh reality of a savior turned traitor, and any being capable of opposing his rule-breaking combat strength was beyond rare. It was rather unfortunate for Juumonji to have two such beings before him, but it was an exceptional stroke of luck for us.

“Haaah!”

Now that Juumonji’s strength was somewhat sapped, Shiran could fight him head-on. It was taking everything she had to hang in there, but that was enough. She wasn’t alone.

“Get around him, Gerbera!” I commanded.

“Understood. Leave it to me, My Lord.”

The tyrant of the Depths, the Great White Spider of legend, could handle this level of carnage. With eight legs, Gerbera easily surpassed the mobility of those present. She ran along the walls and ceiling to attack Juumonji.

This was the reason I had Gerbera pull back while Shiran took the front. Shiran could keep Juumonji pinned in battle while Gerbera swooped down from every direction. Such an onslaught was difficult for even a cheater to handle.

“Ugh... Fuck!” Juumonji cursed as he leaped away from both of them without hesitation.

Shiran took caution not to approach carelessly and kept her sword at the ready, whereas Gerbera spun about and descended from the ceiling next to her. The two of them stood side by side before Juumonji. One was the northern Woodlands’ strongest knight, who had continuously protected the realm of humanity from monsters; the other was the Great White Spider, who prided herself as the strongest monster from the Depths. Considering their backgrounds, they normally would never, could never combine forces like this.

Creating such an impossible scene and serving as the connection between them was my job. I was the only one who could control Gerbera’s ferocity in battle without ruining her momentum while also maintaining a bond of trust with Shiran. As such, they cooperated seamlessly. They were definitively running Juumonji into a corner. This had to be unpleasant for him.

“The hell is with all of you?!” he roared, his temper exploding as he struck the floor with his broadsword. “You’re all nothing but trash, my EXP so I can gain power! You’re just disposable monsters meant for me to make my name as a hero!”

He pulled his sword back out of the floor and pointed its tip at Shiran, then Gerbera.

“Why do you measly little shits have to defy me?!”

At last, Juumonji glared my way as Lily nestled up to my side.

“You’re nothing but food for me to get back home alive,

goddammit!”

Juumonji saw us as nothing more than objects. Perhaps he was even jealous. Despite possessing so much power, Juumonji felt danger all around him. He was anxious about how long he would be able to survive in this world. This was perfectly normal.

Anxieties had a tendency to accumulate. Not everyone could dispel such feelings either. When one looked at their surroundings while spurred by anxiety, everything looked harmful. This was also natural.

Our circumstances were different, but I'd also been on guard with everything around me when I had first come to the fortress. I could understand why he felt that way. Such a state tore his mind apart. But I had Lily, Ayame, and Asarina with me. With those trustworthy girls by my side, I was able to quell my anxieties.

What if I'd had nothing of the sort, though? I didn't even need to consider it. The world would have been hell. Perhaps I too would only see others as mere objects if I were in that situation.

This was just a guess, of course. Maybe Juumonji had such a disposition to begin with, or maybe something else entirely drove him to be this way. I...or in fact, nobody, could speak for the human known as Juumonji Tatsuya.

Besides, no matter his circumstances, it didn't change the fact that many victims had fallen prey to Juumonji's conceited behavior. His sins couldn't be forgiven. He'd become too dangerous for this world. Be that as it may, when I looked at Juumonji now, a certain thought came to mind.

“Just maybe, you would've been better off without that power.”

Juumonji scowled at me, at the words that had spilled from my mouth. But that scowl changed to a sneer in an instant.

“What's this all of a sudden? I'm sure that would've been nice for you, huh?”

“No, I mean for you. You might not get it, though...”

My power was filled with the feelings and bonds I shared with my servants. However, if no such feelings existed, perhaps it would only be a source of misfortune to the surrounding people...and maybe to the wielder himself.

If not for his cheat, Juumonji would never have become a devil. The same applied to the Colony's destruction. Nobody could deny that immature students had been swept along by their thoughtless powers. It was easy for them to make hasty decisions and go with the flow.

So, what was this power we had, exactly? Didn't we need to cultivate a better understanding of it? Although, it was far too late for any of that...

“It's over, Juumonji,” I said as he stared back at me in shock.

“D-Don’t fuck with me! Not like this! Not like this dammit! Like hell I’ll die here! I’ll be the last survivor! Once I eat the rest of you, I’ll return home! It should be possible with this power within me! This power exists for that very purpose! So that means you were all sent to this world to be eaten by me!”

He ranted and raved, rationalizing things by only considering his own person. The composed look of the “savior” had long vanished from his face.

“All of you just shut up and become my nourishment!”

Juumonji dashed forward with his broadsword in hand. His target, as expected, was me. He deployed a red glyph. It was grade 3 fire magic. I narrowed my gaze after confirming this. Juumonji’s attack was exactly the same as before. His rage made him predictable.

“Intercept him, Lily.”

Lily activated the magic she had on standby. Countless exploding fireballs met dancing blades of wind. The magics smashed and sliced and killed each other off. It was the same scene as before, but there was something closing in on Juumonji this time.

“Gerbera!”

“Shyaaah!”

Despite exploding flames and windy blades running rampant, the Great White Spider attacked Juumonji. She disregarded any injuries she might suffer, catching him off guard. Yet Juumonji could still handle this.

“Ugh! Outta the way, you monster!”

His steel blade swept back at Gerbera as she charged through the flames. One of her legs broke with a sharp clang. Gerbera lost her balance and fell to the floor. Even so, a satisfied smile peeked through the opening in her disheveled hair.

“U-Urgh! D-Dammit...?!”

Gerbera’s attack, which paid no heed to her broken leg, had enough force to it that Juumonji lost his grip on his sword. The blade fluttered in the air as the magic flames and winds died down. That was when Shiran stepped forth.

The elf’s body was ever so fragile compared to Juumonji and Gerbera. The explosive flames and biting winds were like the gates of hell to her. Considering how she couldn’t use magic right now, she had no way of dealing with it either. That was why she chose to charge in now. Gerbera’s attack bought the perfect amount of time for Shiran to catch him off guard. There was no dodging her now.

“Haaaah!”

Juumonji threw up his arm in defense, catching Shiran’s horizontal slash. Her strike cleanly severed his arm, and it went flying into the air. His block was enough to dull her strike, however. With

just a little more reach, she would've cut his throat. Her blade missed by just a few centimeters.

“Gaaaaaargh?!”

Juumonji screamed at the intense pain that followed. Shiran didn't pause and instead followed through with another strike.

“It's over!”

“Like hell it is!”

Juumonji roared with a forward kick. His foot sank into Shiran's stomach before she could take her second swing. By all rights, this was nothing more than a desperate attack, but with the power of a cheater, it became a peerless blow.

Shiran's armor crumpled and her innards burst. Her knees buckled as she choked on her own blood, sending crimson droplets down her jaw and onto the floor. Juumonji laughed as he watched this and stretched his hand out to his broadsword still flailing in the air.

Now that Shiran was an undead monster, this wasn't enough to immobilize her, but she still required a moment to breathe before taking action once more. And in that space of time, Juumonji grabbed his sword and—

“Huh...?”

The stretching parasite creeper snatched that future away from him. Juumonji's hand grabbed nothing but air as his eyes chased the creeper to her source.

“Y-You...?!”

I met his eyes. To the very end, he didn't look at me as a fellow human.

“Now, Shiran!” I screamed, before Juumonji could start his wailing.

Still kneeling on the floor, Shiran readied her sword at her waist.

“Yaaaah!”

And as she stood up, she unleashed a single strike. The diagonal slash tore deeply through Juumonji's body.

Chapter 12: The End of the Battle

A large spurt of blood scattered as Juumonji slowly fell backward. Standing before him, Shiran was just barely able to support her own body by using her blood-stained sword as a cane. Juumonji wasn't even twitching. A large crimson puddle spread out on the corridor floor.

"We...won, right?" Lily murmured next to me as she watched this unfold.

"Yeah," I replied briefly as I retracted Asarina.

The broadsword she'd caught fell to the floor with a clang.

We won. We definitely won. Still, I felt more relieved that it was over than happy we'd won. There were too many victims for me to bask in victory. A large majority of the knights and soldiers of this fortress were dead, along with nine of my fellow students. They were never coming back. Nevertheless, I believed there was meaning in stopping Juumonji Tatsuya here.

"The strong do whatever they want."

Could I deny Kudou's words of resignation now? I wanted to offer this conclusion to that pitiful boy and all the victims who'd died here.

"Master."

I turned around to Lily's voice. Gerbera walked over, her steps unsteady from having lost two of her legs. Shiran followed behind her, the blood she had coughed up still dirtying her lips.

"Sorry for putting so much on your plate, Gerbera. You too, Shiran. Good work, both of you."

"Worry not, this is nothing. We simply defeated our enemy. That is all there is to it," Gerbera said.

"This fight belonged to Fort Tilia in the first place. There is nothing you need worry yourself over, Takahiro," Shiran added.

Regardless, I couldn't bring myself to look at their tattered bodies. Even more so considering the cleanup job that remained.

"Juumonji is defeated, but there are still monsters in the fortress. We're almost there. Please lend me your strength," I said, and the girls' blooming smiles returned to me as if to tell me not to worry about it.

"Roger that, Master."

"Of course."

"Mm. I shall scatter them with ease."

My companions' reassuring replies brought a small smile to my face. I then turned my thoughts toward what came next. We were likely the only force left who could exterminate the monsters within the fortress. We had to sweep them up and shelter any survivors.

Now that Gerbera was with us, however, we needed an easy-to-understand way of demonstrating she was an ally, seeing as how she couldn't hide the fact that she was a monster. As an elf, Shiran didn't have much persuasive power in this regard, so our best course of action was to first rendezvous with the Alliance Knights who were on standby a short distance away.

"Lily, heal Gerbera. Once you're done, we'll meet up with the knights."

Gerbera was the strongest combatant among my servants. Even if this was only cleanup duty, it was best to have her fully healed in case of the unexpected. Gerbera's natural recovery speed was already astounding, but when combined with Lily's healing magic, even a lost limb or two would recover within minutes.

With that short amount of time to spare, I went to finish off another matter. Since healing magic did nothing for her as an undead monster, Shiran accompanied me. I was grateful. This job wasn't one I felt good about.

"Ahh... Aaah... No..."

Surprisingly, Juumonji was still alive. He had lost consciousness, but his tenacious vitality as a warrior quickly woke him back up and preserved his life. Still, that wouldn't last much longer. Shiran's slash was clearly lethal. If an exploration team member who specialized in healing magic were here, they could probably restore him from this deathly state, but no such person existed within the fortress. All that was left for him was despair and agony. There was only one thing that could save him now.

"Behead him, Takahiro," Shiran said with a frown. "Even a villain who has stolen countless lives shouldn't be left to suffer idly like this."

"Yeah," I replied curtly as I drew closer to Juumonji with my sword in hand.

"I'm...ack..." he murmured in a gurgling voice.

"I'm...going...back... Even...my own..."

He had dragged himself about a meter, leaving behind a trail of blood. Lying before me now was nothing more than a commonplace boy clinging to life.

I was the one who'd brought an end to his life. Shiran was the one to actually cut him, but that didn't matter. I killed him. Any pity now would be horribly hypocritical. Thinking of what he'd done, there was no room for sympathy.

Still, I didn't feel like I'd ever be able to feel nothing when

presented with such a scene. It was just as I'd said to Rose that evening after we killed Kaga. I gained the ability to fight, even if just a little, but in the end, I still couldn't become a hero or a monster. This was probably for the best. Just from how Juumonji had acted, I could tell what it would be like to feel nothing at the deaths of others. It made me more aware of it than I ever wanted to be.

"Takahiro. If it is too hard for you, then I can..."

"No."

I shook my head at Shiran's anxious suggestion. I was in fact reluctant to dodge my responsibilities, and letting Shiran deal the finishing blow could plant troublesome seeds that could haunt her later. She had already turned into an undead monster. Considering her uncertain future, I couldn't possibly let her bear the title of Savior Slayer on top of that.

"This is my job."

I brandished my sword.

The blade felt heavier than usual, now that I was faced with a human.

Right to the very end, Juumonji never saw us as such, but that didn't change how I saw him.

I had to kill Juumonji.

I would live on in this world carrying that burden.

A sharp blade plunged through meat and unleashed a spurt of blood.

The dull sound of a life succumbing to death resounded through the corridor.

Chapter 13: The Remaining Mystery

I stood there dumbfounded as I listened to his life leaving his body. I still hadn't swung my sword. A pitch-black blade had flown out of nowhere and was now sticking out of Juumonji's back as he laid there facedown. The sword, which looked like it was made out of a shadow, stole Juumonji's life. The unexpected event brought my thoughts to a complete halt.

"Takahiro!" Shiran yelled as she stepped in front of me.

Countless shadowy swords rained down on us from the front.

"U-Ugh..."

Shiran repelled them one after another, but there were just too many. Even she would be overwhelmed if she continued covering for me. I jumped back on reflex and she followed shortly after. Dozens of swords were sticking out of the floor where we were just standing. Things didn't end there, though. Even more shadowy blades took chase after us.

"Master!"

"Fall back, My Lord!"

Lily and Gerbera joined us and intercepted the attack. Gerbera spread a net-like web with both her hands, tying up the incoming blades. Lily's spear repelled the ones that managed to slip through. Our assailant judged any further attacks to be useless, or perhaps there was a limit to how many swords they could unleash. In any case, the onslaught came to a stop.

"Something's there..."

I suppressed my pounding heart and tried to confirm the situation. Swords still pincushioned the corridor's ground. Beyond them, I could see a large, human-shaped shadow that comprised only an upper body. I had seen this type of monster before. It was called a doppelganger. This specimen was a little different from what I was familiar with, though.

It was huge. Though it was only an upper body, it was easily three meters tall. Its gut swelled out so much one would think it had swallowed an entire human. It was multiple times larger than any normal doppelganger.

"Master, be careful. Something's wrong here," Lily said, her spear at the ready.

Immediately following that, the shadow swords in the ground

began to change shape.

“What the...?!”

One after another, they crumbled away, mixing together into several lumps. The shadows eventually took on the form of dozens of doppelgangers. The corridor was packed with monsters in an instant. A horde of them were born from a single enormous specimen. It was my first time seeing such a phenomenon, but I’d heard of a being capable of such behavior before.

“A monster who gives birth to others... A queen?”

Monsters possessed mana. Those who accumulated mana beyond a certain limit could give birth to new monsters. These were called queen monsters. The large doppelganger before us was definitely one such specimen.

Everything had been fine up until this point. It was surprising, but I at least knew what this was. What followed, however, was altogether outside the limits of my imagination.

“Master, that’s really a queen monster, right?” Lily said in a hoarse voice. “So why isn’t it connected to us through the mental path?”

As a visitor from another world, I had the ability to connect to the hearts of monsters who possessed a large quantity of mana. To simplify, I could connect to rare monsters and above. Queens were far beyond rare monsters. And yet the monster before me, the doppelqueen, for lack of a better term, wasn’t connected to me.

Even with Shiran, who was quite the special case, I’d been able to grasp a thin thread-like connection between us. Here, I couldn’t sense a thing. In other words, the monster before me defied the rules I knew of.

“What exactly are you?” I asked, but I didn’t expect a response.

Monsters didn’t possess an ego so long as the mental path wasn’t connected. That was purely how my ability worked. As such, there was no way for this monster to respond. There was no way it was supposed to...

“I never thought Juumonji Tatsuya of all people would be defeated in a head-on collision.”

A response came nonetheless. It was a virile boy’s voice. I gulped upon hearing it. It was Juumonji’s voice. It wasn’t the actual person in question, of course. He was already dead. It was an elaborate imitation of him. The horde of doppelgangers all copied his form at the same time.

They could only duplicate his outer appearance, but the imitation was perfect enough that it was impossible to tell them apart from the original. There was just one major difference. There wasn’t anything resembling an expression on their faces.

For better or worse, none of his humanity showed through—none of the selfishness that tore down an uncountable number of victims, none of the arrogance that ignored the harm he caused, none of the cold attitude that surveyed all those around him. That one missing feature trivialized Juumonji Tatsuya's existence much more cruelly than merely carving his likeness.

All of them turned to me in unison with their expressionless faces. It was a bizarre scene that felt like it was meant to destabilize my spirit.

"Let us just say that you did splendidly, Second King."

The Juumonji Tatsuya nearest to me spoke. Its voice was cut and dry, like a machine. There was no emotion to it at all.

"I bore full witness to your power. You did well to tame that fiendish undead monster."

A different body spoke this time, followed by yet another.

"Gerbera, is it? That big spider lady is awfully scary."

"The slime's mimicry is also abnormal."

"He called her Lily, right?"

"The others too."

"Ayame and Asarina."

"They said there was another one outside the fortress."

"Rose, I think."

The speaker kept changing one after another, yet they were all Juumonji Tatsuya. They even brought up the names of all of my servants, including Rose, who wasn't here with us.

"His way is different from our king's."

"An ominous power."

"A large enough threat as he is now."

"I had been targeting this man's life—"

"—All this time."

The last specimen to speak was the only one maintaining its form as a monster, the doppelqueen. She held up the real Juumonji's body. I didn't have any time to stop her. She opened her mouth wide and swallowed his corpse.

The enormous shadow wriggled as a jarring damp crunch echoed in the air. It was the sound of chewing. And with a large gulp, her bloated belly grew even larger. With that, Juumonji Tatsuya eternally vanished from this world as nourishment for a monster.

I guess his appearance is still hanging around, though... Dozens of them, at that.

The Juumonji Tatsuya who'd offered the real corpse to the doppelqueen turned around and patted its stomach.

"Thanks for the meal."

"It talks...?" Lily finally muttered, giving voice to my own

suspicious. “A doppelganger? By its own will?”

A doppelganger could copy the form of its target. However, even if it copied a human, it couldn’t manipulate words. They didn’t possess egos, after all. Yet the specimen before us was speaking with us. In other words, no matter what shape it took, this proved it had a will of its own.

“Could this be the talking monster Sakagami mentioned?” I quietly groaned.

Sakagami had mentioned it after we cornered him. He could give orders to the other monsters by going through a single specimen who had a will. If this was that same monster, it made sense why my ability didn’t work on it.

I was a cheater, but this monster was under the effect of somebody else’s cheat. It wasn’t that the rules had changed; it was that the rules were different. That was why my ability didn’t work. As far as I could tell from Lily and the other girls, they weren’t under the influence of this power either, so my guess was likely correct.

“That makes you Berta, right?”

All of the Juumonji Tatsuyas grinned at once. For an instant, I didn’t even realize they were smiling. Whenever humans smiled, even if it was fake, there was some sort of emotion behind it. But Berta’s smile had none of that. It was as if curved lips had been plastered on skin. I couldn’t feel anything but revulsion from it.

I felt an intense sense of discomfort from her inhuman behavior, precisely because she kind of resembled a human. Just looking at her made me feel sick. I felt like vomiting. It was like watching countless wriggling centipedes. There was no reality to the scene before me. I was starting to get dizzier and dizzier.

“Don’t get sucked in, My Lord.”

A graceful hand sat atop my shoulder.

“Ger...bera...?”

“What an impertinent ruse. It’s a glamor.”

A...*glamor*? I felt like I only just noticed the haze over my consciousness after she mentioned that. I’d heard during Kei’s lectures that there were in fact monsters who could cast glamors.

Glamors didn’t deal direct damage to one’s physical body, but instead tore apart one’s mind. One could resist it to a certain extent by using mana, but that also meant it was exceptionally easy to fall prey to it when caught off guard. For example, in the case of a certain plant-type monster, the beauty of a flower in full bloom or a rich scent could steal their prey’s consciousness and bewitch them. I’d never heard of doppelgangers possessing this power, though. It was probably an ability inherent to the doppelqueen Berta.

“Pull yourself together, My Lord. If you allow yourself to be

sucked in, it will be all that much easier to bewitch you.”

“So that’s the way it works...” I said with a groan.

I now knew this was a calculated move by this monster. In fact, even Lily and Shiran were bewitched by the bizarre scene before them. The only reason Gerbera was able to maintain her composure was because she didn’t have much experience with humans. This sight was dreadful to a human, but to a pure monster like her, it was just a little weird. Furthermore, her stance on the matter also factored into this.

“Do not forget, My Lord. You have us with you. There is nothing to fear. No matter what this is, there is no mistaking it for anything more than an enemy who wishes us ill. Thus, it’s a simple matter. All we must do is crush it, no?”

Gerbera’s logic was to the point. That was why she didn’t waver. But this was an enormous roadblock to the doppelganger trying to bewitch us.

“It seems the only special one is the big one in the back. The others are just soulless terminals. It’ll all be over once we smash it.”

Gerbera’s legs skittered about, causing the Juumonji Tatsuyas to twitch.

“She’s really scary.”

“You’re scary.”

“She’s on a totally different level from me.”

“I’m jealous.”

“I’m envious.”

They seemed resentful.

“Silence,” Gerbera scoffed. “It’s the height of absurdity for pests like you to try and bewitch me. You are naught but scavengers come to feed on weakened prey. Know of your blunder. You should have never crawled out so shamelessly. I shall teach you who is truly the prey here.”

A colossal storm of bloodlust burst from the girl who boasted peerless beauty, choking the corridor. Even with the wounds from her previous battle, the Great White Spider of the Depths was here in force. A mere queen monster was entirely beneath her. The petty shadows of little doppelgangers couldn’t possibly stain her white world. Even I could feel a physical pressure from the torrent of bloodlust, which was more than enough to overwhelm these creatures who didn’t even possess proper emotions.

“U-Ugh...”

The doppelgangers began trembling, their stiff smiles affixed to their faces like masks. Everything they were they borrowed from Juumonji, but their fear was the real thing. That was exactly why I found it suspicious...

Thanks to Gerbera, the glamor on me was gone. Now that there was no haze over my mind, something felt wholly out of place. Unlike my servants, the doppelqueen didn't seem to possess much emotion, but that only made her fear that much more palpable. To borrow Gerbera's phrasing, why did she come crawling out shamelessly like this? It was crystal clear things would end up this way.

"Naught but scavengers."

"Oh, that's true."

"I can't deny it."

The Juumonji Tatsuyas continued speaking as I looked on in suspicion.

"I can't win against you."

"But I don't need to win."

"There's one way of dealing with an opponent who can't be beaten in a fight."

"It's simply a matter of not fighting."

Gerbera grimaced. "Do you plan on running away? How foolish. Do you believe I'll allow you to?"

The Juumonji Tatsuyas trembled in fear but continued talking.

"That's the plan."

"I've fulfilled my goal."

"Now I just need to escape."

"I have the capability to do so."

"As I am capable, I simply have to do it."

"Not that I care what will happen in the meantime."

There was one thing they mentioned that I couldn't possibly overlook.

"Hang on, Gerbera," I said, holding her back with my hand. I had an exceedingly bad feeling. "You don't care what happens? What do you know that we don't?"

The emotionless Juumonjis turned my way in unison.

"I'm glad it got across to you."

"I thought I would get torn to pieces."

"It's quite inconvenient for both of us, after all."

"Very well, I'll tell you."

"To put it simply..."

The Juumonji Tatsuyas maintained their mask-like smiles and all said in unison, "My name isn't Berta. I'm Anton."

I instantly understood what this implied, seeing that a wolf howled down the hallway at the same time.

"Crap! They got us!"

"Wh-What's the matter, My Lord? Also, what was that noise?"

"This one's just buying time. They're trying to take Sakagami back!"

“What?!”

If this was Anton, then there was another monster out there named Berta. The Alliance Knights were acting separately from us and restraining the unconscious Sakagami. The doppelqueen, Anton, was drawing our attention while Berta went after them.

The knights were a gathering of elites. Faced with normal monsters, they could hold out until we got there. However, the talking monster Berta was definitely more powerful than a normal specimen. This was extremely bad. They could retake Sakagami Gouta. This possibility had completely slipped my mind, despite its utmost importance. Or perhaps Anton’s actions were calculated to make me forget. The impact of her appearance and the glamor she cast was all to lay the groundwork for this outcome.

After confirming we understood this, Anton slowly slinked back down the corridor in retreat. She was running away now that she’d accomplished her goal, just as she claimed she would. We had the means to stop her, but right now we didn’t have the time to pay her any mind.

“Let’s hurry over to the commander. Shiran, please watch the rear!” I yelled, dashing down the corridor at full speed.



The knights had kept their distance from us only so that they wouldn’t get caught in our battle with Juumonji. They weren’t actually all that far away. We were quickly able to rendezvous with them. Several of them lay collapsed in the corridor. Those unharmed were taking care of their comrades who were slumped against the walls or sprawled out on the ground. Among them, I saw the commander and Mikihiro running around busily.

“Takahiro!”

Kei spotted me and ran over. Her blonde hair was a mess and tears pooled her eyes. When I saw the little fox in her arms, all the blood drained from my face.

“Ayame?!” Gerbera shouted from right behind me.

Kei was on the verge of screaming and running away as the arachne closed in on her, but she seemed to understand this wasn’t an enemy, judging by how she was accompanying me. The little girl stood her ground. Gerbera and I took a closer look at Ayame as Kei continued to cast healing magic on her, shoddy as it was.

“Thank goodness, she’s still breathing,” I said with a sigh of relief.

Though she looked so fragile, Ayame wasn’t just a baby fox. She was a monster. Her tiny body was actually quite tough. I called Lily over and had her heal Ayame fully.

“What happened?” I asked Kei.

“We were attacked by a giant two-headed wolf.”

This likely described Berta. I felt bitter at the thought. We had been thoroughly outwitted.

“Ayame...covered for me... I’m sorry,” Kei said in a depressed voice.

“Don’t apologize. Thanks for telling me.” I plopped my hand on her head. There was no point in blaming her. “Leave the rest to me. Kei, you handle healing the injured with Shiran.”

“Huh...? Shiran? Is my sister here?”

Kei’s blue eyes, which much resembled Shiran’s, shot wide open just as the undead knight came running over from her rearguard duty.

“Takahiro. Anton isn’t showing any signs of pursuit.”

“I see.”

Shiran wasn’t liable to let anything pass, and that was why I’d had her keep watch on our rear. Her gaze was still vigilantly fixed to the north as she relayed her report.

“It should be safe for now. However, we should keep watch for—”

“Shiran!” Kei yelled, leaping at her sister and hugging her. “I’m so glad you’re okay!” She went on to cry loudly in Shiran’s arms.

“Kei...” Shiran looked somewhat troubled as she placed her hand on Kei’s head.

This was a reunion with the big sister she had thought was lost forever. It was natural for Kei to be overcome with emotion.

I left Kei to Shiran and took a look around. I couldn’t see Sakagami anywhere, meaning he had already been rescued. It was a blessing in disguise that the monster’s goal was only to retrieve him, so none of the knights died in the process.

Still, I couldn’t help but think... Why now? Sakagami had been moments away from death earlier. The only reason he survived was because of Juumonji’s intrusion. And yet, borrowing the doppelqueen’s words, neither Anton nor Berta reacted when their “king” screamed for help. Were they just far away at the time?

No, that can’t be it.. Anton had mentioned Rose’s name. My group was the only one who knew of Rose. We’d only mentioned her once since coming to the fortress, when Gerbera found us while Sakagami was screaming for help. The fact that Anton knew Rose’s name meant that she had been hiding nearby and overheard us. Yet she didn’t answer Sakagami’s call for help.

Well, to be specific, Sakagami had been screaming for Berta to help him, not Anton. Still, that was a really stupid reason not to come and save him. Calling him her king after abandoning him once already—that was a hard truth to swallow. The situation felt at odds with itself. It was like one of my base assumptions was way off the mark.

“Hey, Master?”

“What is it, Lily? Oh, are you done with her treatment?” I turned around to see Ayame sleeping soundly in Lily’s arms. “Looks like she’ll be fine for now, huh?” I gently brushed her little body, then changed gears. “Okay, let’s chase after Sakagami quickly.”

I wasn’t sure whether we could catch up or not, but we couldn’t leave him at large. We had to at least confirm he was no longer in the fortress, otherwise it would be difficult to rescue the survivors.

“Shiran, you stay here. Gerbera, come with me. I’ll need your nose too, Lily.”

“Of course. That’s fine and all, but...” Lily nodded, but she looked pensive.

“Lily?”

“Hmm. Speaking of my nose...” Lily pointed her finger at her own nose, which was capable of mimicking a firefang’s sense of smell.

“What is it?”

“Hmm... I might be mistaken, and it kinda sounds impossible...” Lily was being strangely inarticulate. I found this curious, but I still listened closely. “Anton...had a certain smell to her.”

“A smell? What smell?”

“The exploration team’s Watanabe Yoshiki.” She sounded incredulous at her own words, leaving me even more perplexed. “He got his head cut off and died, didn’t he? So maybe I’m just mistaken, but...”

Lily’s tone was still uncertain. There was no reason for Watanabe’s scent to be coming from Anton. Although, seeing that Lily was going out of her way to mention this, she really did identify such a scent. Meaning...

“Hey, Takahiro,” Mikihiko called me from behind. “Is that true? Doesn’t that mean...he’s alive?”

“No. That’s got to be impossible. We saw him die...”

“Isn’t there one other possibility? Come on. You forget already? Lily just said it earlier, when we were worried about doppelgangers hiding among the soldiers.”

“I did...?” Lily asked with a surprised look, pointing at herself.

Mikihiko nodded. “Yeah. You said we didn’t need to worry about doppelgangers, it was just hard to identify one in a crowd, like the soldiers on the ramparts. So in other words, you wouldn’t be able to tell if Watanabe got switched out for a doppelganger up there, would you?”

“Oh.” Lily gulped.

“Especially considering how Juumonji blew up the place right as we got there. So couldn’t it be possible?”

Chapter 14: Unveiling the Mystery

Within the Woodlands a short distance from Fort Tilia...

A boy with disheveled dirty blond hair, Sakagami Gouta, was stabbing a knife intensely into the ground, a gloomy air hanging over him.

“Heh. Heheh... Hehehehehe...”

He was drawing something in the moss-covered dirt, laughing all the while as if having a fit. It was like he was playing with a voodoo doll. It was almost curious how he didn’t notice his own deranged behavior, the flawed conviction that he draped around himself.

His vigorous movements opened his wounds. He was too engrossed in his work to notice. The cloth wrapped around his thigh was wet with dripping blood. Despite being impaired by his leg, which was refusing to move as he willed it, Sakagami didn’t stop and doggedly continued carving the ground, his eyes bloodshot.

Right next to him was a double-headed wolf. It deviated a fair bit from a regular firefang, but I could still tell that was what it was. It wasn’t all that much bigger than one, but its dignified bearing clearly set it apart from common monsters. I could see the light of reason dwelling behind both pairs of eyes. Its long gray hair was magnificent, giving it the air of a monarch.

There were somewhere around ten monsters in the area. The only one who appeared to have anything resembling an ego was the double-headed wolf, which made her Berta.

“Done!” Sakagami shouted in exaltation.

He had drawn a crooked circle on the ground about three meters in diameter. There was a complex pattern of lines running through its interior. It looked like the scribbling of a child, but judging from his reaction, there was no way it was anything quite so cute.

“What are you up to, Sakagami?”

Sakagami, who’d had a twisted smile plastered on his face, jerked up all of a sudden. He turned around and was greeted with an already brandished spear.

“Gurgh?!”

Lily charged in and placed her spear against his jaw. Berta sensed the oncoming attack, but Gerbera cut her off. With that, any counterattack was out of the question. Berta’s choice to take a step back was a splendid decision on her part.

“Graaaaaah!”

One of Berta’s heads unleashed a crimson flame while the other spat out a hailstorm of ice, both targeting Gerbera. She was engulfed in fire, ice, and steam. Nevertheless, Gerbera paid it no mind and kept charging forward as the other monsters in the area rushed her.

“Out of the way.”

There was a rough rabbit, a gutsgallaz, and a treant, among others, but none of them posed a threat to her. She quite literally kicked them aside, but their sacrifice allowed Berta to escape her grasp.

Even though I’d instructed Gerbera beforehand not to chase her too far, just in case, the fact that Berta managed to slip out of range proved she was a fairly powerful monster.

Once she was a safe distance away, the remaining monsters gathered around Berta. I left Gerbera to hold them in check, and I turned my gaze to the now captured Sakagami.

“You’re late, Majima-senpai. I just finished the ritual.”

Even with Lily’s spear at his throat, Sakagami’s composure didn’t break. The strange drawing he’d just finished apparently granted him great confidence.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You can’t tell? It’s a glyph. One to attract monsters.”

Now that he mentioned it, the drawing kind of resembled a poor mockup of a glyph. It had the shape of a pentagram, which differed from the patterns used in this world.

“Monsters are gonna swarm the area in the hundreds, just like before. Hyahahaha! Looks like you brought some amazing ones with you, but how long can they keep you safe?”

I could hear skittering from behind me. Gerbera was showing her irritation at Sakagami. I didn’t even have to turn and look; I felt her feelings through the mental path. I held out my arm to restrain her.

“You’re right. If that happens, I bet the few survivors still left in the fortress will be overwhelmed.”

“Whoa there. You’re not thinking you can stop them by offing me, are you? Sorry, there ain’t no point in doing that now. I can’t do a thing about it no more.”

“So you can’t stop it. You did mention that before. You can’t control the monsters. You’re only able to attract them. That’s what this...*glyph* is for?”

“Damn straight. You being here means you beat Juumonji, yeah? I’m sure it was an epic struggle, but too bad for you.”

Sakagami sneered at me, holding his sides in laughter. He could’ve just kept running away, but apparently he stayed in the area because of this. It was questionable whether he could actually get away from

us even if he did run, though...

"My Lord?" A hushed voice tickled my ear. I turned around and saw Gerbera's blood red eyes, still affixed on Berta. "Isn't that enough now?"

I could feel emotions akin to burning hot magma beneath her cold voice. The injury Ayame had suffered during Sakagami's escape had her seething with rage. Seeing that she was liable to leap in at any moment, the double-headed wolf began growling.

"I understand your desire to be careful, but there is no meaning in further conversation with a fool who does not even realize that he sits upon another's throne."

"Stay put, Gerbera," Lily said, keeping her spear at Sakagami's throat. "We don't know that's the case for sure yet."

"Hmph. It's pretty much guaranteed, seeing this mockery of a glyph or whatever it's supposed to be."

"Still..." Lily mumbled.

Sakagami looked confused by their conversation. "Wh-What're you talking about? Hang on. It's like you're saying..."

His words trailed off into silence. He finally started to realize that nobody here was paying him any sort of special attention.

"Hey, Sakagami," I said, giving him a sidelong glance. Lily was right. We still didn't know for sure. I had to confirm it. "This is important, so answer me honestly."

"Why do I gotta—"

"Just answer me. It's no big deal; it'll only take a second. Just say yes or no." I ignored his snarling, then asked, "Sakagami, do you recognize the name Anton?"

"Huh...?"

He looked confused. This was as eloquent a response as I needed.

"Thought so. I guess we were right. That's why you only called for Berta. We're fine then. You just stay put right there."

I turned my gaze to the double-headed wolf. She was looking at us with rational, clever eyes. Her bearing resembled that of certain watchdogs.

"You can talk, right? How about saying something if you've got a rebuttal? Now's the time if you want to make some kind of excuse."

Berta stopped growling. "How...?" she said in a deep voice. "How did you realize?"

It was an abstract question, but I knew what she was asking. She didn't plan on making any excuses. Perhaps she was being gracious, or maybe she didn't feel a need to do so.

"Lily found Watanabe's scent on Anton, which got us thinking," I answered, probing Berta's mind. "Mikihiko said it was possible that the Watanabe we saw die was just a doppelganger."

Mikihiko had had a good point. Lily's nose was excellent, but it wasn't omnipotent. Even if Watanabe was actually a doppelganger, she wouldn't have been able to tell in such a short amount of time. Doppelgangers returned to their original form when they died, but we couldn't find his corpse after the explosion blew it away.

"That couldn't have been a doppelganger, though. He was a cheater. Right when his head flew off, he cast grade 5 magic. A doppelganger can't reproduce abilities. They can only take their target's form. They could never use grade 5 magic."

That massive concentration of mana was the real thing. Even with its power halved by Watanabe's death, it had almost killed Gerbera just because she was near the blast. That was definitely a cheater's trump card, grade 5 magic on a grand scale.

"Not even Juumonji can replicate that kind of magic. It's irrefutable proof that it was the real Watanabe who got killed... So why did Anton have his scent? Thinking back on it, I realized Anton's behavior was unusual."

"H-Hey. Who the hell is Anton? What're you talking about?" Sakagami said in a trembling voice. "Explain it so I can understand!"

He had been left behind. I ignored him while Berta listened closely to what I had to say.

"After Anton killed Juumonji, she ate his corpse. This was unnecessary. Unlike a mimic slime, doppelgangers don't need to eat their targets to copy them. Oh, and one more thing. Anton exposed herself to unnecessary danger. She said she was targeting Juumonji's life, but if that was all she wanted, then I was just seconds away from killing him myself. There was no need to crawl out and expose herself."

I recalled Anton's mechanical impression. All of her actions felt like they were meant to desecrate Juumonji's being, but it was all a part of the doppelqueen's glamor. For example, humans are repulsed by wasps and caterpillars, but fellow insects see each other as simple living beings. Anton was the same. She wasn't inhumane, just inhuman. Her insect-like lack of emotion and her almost automated actions appeared unnatural to me. I didn't think she'd do anything useless, or rather she couldn't have done so. That was the key factor here.

"She's emotionless like a machine and doesn't seem capable of acting without reason. And suddenly, she does just that right in front of us. The natural conclusion is that there was some purpose to it, right? In other words, she had a reason to kill and eat Juumonji herself. Thinking of it that way, it was pretty easy to see why Watanabe's scent came from Anton."

Anton was a queen monster. Her body was larger than that of a

normal doppelganger, measuring around 3 meters tall, and her belly was swollen as if she'd just eaten a human.

"Anton ate Watanabe's corpse, just like Juumonji's. Of course his scent would be there. His body was inside her, after all."

Gerbera calling Anton a scavenger was unexpectedly right on the mark. Having said that, I didn't know why exactly she ate their corpses. I didn't know enough to figure it out.

"Watanabe really did die up on the ramparts. He wasn't switched out with a doppelganger. Mikihiko's idea wasn't bad; the conclusion was just wrong. But it made me think that Anton's master could've been there too and was switched out with a doppelganger."

I probably wouldn't have noticed this on my own, which would've left us totally in the dark.

"Anton called her master her king. Even for a mechanical being, I sensed a hint of loyalty in that. Yet when her supposed king Sakagami asked for help, she didn't respond despite being close enough to hear him. I thought this was strange, but if Anton's master was in fact someone else entirely, then it isn't all that weird."

This was also the reason Berta had so easily allowed us to catch up to Sakagami. At its logical extreme, it meant she didn't care what happened to him.

It made me wonder whether Anton's objective, the one she said she'd accomplished before running away, was in fact killing and eating Juumonji, rather than providing a distraction so that Berta could rescue Sakagami. There was a true master who manipulated the powerful monsters known as Anton and Berta, after all.

This sham of a glyph was obviously a complete and downright lie. Sakagami didn't possess the ability to attract monsters at all. Someone out there was using him as cover; someone made Sakagami believe their cheat was his.

The fact that their ability clashed with mine meant they were likely a cheater. In other words, it was one of the students. I could exclude the survivors in Fort Tilia, Miyoshi and his three friends. If we hadn't protected them, they would've been caught in the collapse of the walls or killed by Juumonji's grade 2 magic that followed. It would have been a different matter if they were actually doppelgangers, but that was impossible. Right after the collapse, we left Shiran behind to hold off Juumonji and escaped with Miyoshi's group. If one of them was a doppelganger, Lily would've definitely realized at that point. Meaning it was someone among the large crowd of humans on the ramparts who was blown up in the initial blast.

"Berta. Your real master is—"

"You're lying!" Sakagami screamed. "You're lying! Liar! Liar!"

He ran off wailing at the top of his lungs. This caught us off guard.

We hadn't actually forgotten he was here, but our wariness toward him was remarkably low, since we knew he was nothing more than a decoy.

Having said that, even if Sakagami chose to attack me, we'd be able to handle him one way or another. We were at least prepared for that possibility, but he didn't choose to charge me. He was running in an unexpected direction, right toward Berta.

"What the?! You idiot! Get back here, Sakagami!" I yelled.

"Shut up!"

My words didn't reach him. He ran awkwardly through the forest with his injured legs and fell to his knees, clinging to Berta.

"Berta! Y-You're my underling, right?! I won't believe this shit! Didn't you say I'm your master?! Didn't you teach me how to call monsters?! Hey!"

"..."

For some reason, there was a look of pain in Berta's eyes as she listened to Sakagami's pleas, but that only lasted for an instant.

"You can stop now, Berta. I don't need him. He's just in the way of Senpai and I having a chat, so please have him take his leave."

A boy's voice came through the trees. Berta's hesitation suddenly vanished as if this was some divine revelation. Her jaws opened, revealing a row of sharp fangs, and closed with a snap. Everything above Sakagami's chest vanished. It happened in an instant. Blood gushed everywhere as more monsters began appearing. Dozens of them were closing in all around us.

"Master!"

"I know."

I didn't have the time to mourn the loss of life before my eyes. I had Asarina stretch out around my body as I got my sword and shield at the ready.

"Good evening, Senpai."

The other monster tamer appeared. The time had come to unveil everything.

Chapter 15: Those Who Lead, Those Who Obey

A large number of monsters appeared as if seeping out of the trees. I counted more than twenty of them just from those I could see. Berta wagged her tail and nestled up against the boy who slowly walked our way, leading the monsters. He paid this no mind as a gentle smile took shape on his slender features.

“You don’t seem surprised, Senpai. Did you already figure out it was me?”

“Yeah, I expected this,” I answered with a sigh. “Kudou Riku, to think you were the monster tamer who attacked Fort Tilia...”

Standing before me was the bullied kid, Kudou Riku. He was supposed to have died from Juumonji’s magic atop the inner walls. The fact that he was here meant it had been a doppelganger of him that had been destroyed in that blast.



“How could you tell I was the real monster tamer among all the students who were there? I’d be glad if you could tell me, for future reference.”

“It’s not all that complicated. Anyone there could’ve been a doppelganger, but framing Sakagami as a monster tamer wasn’t something just anyone could do.”

In contrast to Kudou’s calm demeanor, my tone was bitter. Even though I’d anticipated this, seeing him acting like that right before my eyes spurred an unpleasant feeling within me.

“Sakagami truly thought he had the power to call forth monsters,” I continued. “In order to mislead him, one would need to use a similar ability any time he tried to call monsters. Making him think he needed some kind of ritual to do it would alert one to when they needed to use their cheat, but they’d still need to stay close to him.”

“I see. Meaning it could be no one but me, seeing that I was with Sakagami ever since he took refuge in that hut.”

There was one other thing that led me to this conclusion, a conjecture based on my own experiences. Berta certainly looked clever, but she was still a monster and had only gained an ego recently. It would be difficult for her to continue deceiving Sakagami. Such behavior necessitated human deviousness, after all.

“You framed Sakagami to secure your own safety, right?” I asked.

“Yes. I guess you know this already, but the weakness of our abilities lies in the weakness of the tamer themselves,” Kudou answered frankly. “Conversely, there’s no power more convenient for moving behind the scenes, especially after faking your own death and going into hiding. Sakagami might have realized he was a scapegoat, though, if he could no longer use his ability when I wasn’t around...”

“But that’s not a problem if he’s dead, huh? That’s why you rescued him. You should have finished him off right away, then. We discovered you like this because you were being too greedy.”

The reason Kudou had Berta rescue Sakagami was, frankly, to shut his mouth. And yet he didn’t have Sakagami killed right away. Because of that, I was able to talk to Sakagami and confirm that there was another monster tamer who had attacked the fortress. Kudou did of course have a reason not to kill him right away, but we’d already set up countermeasures against that.

“I know you’re trying to feed the students to your monsters. I bet you were planning on targeting the surviving students by luring us out using Sakagami as bait... But too bad. Miyoshi and the others have already escaped into the Woodlands with the Alliance Knights.”

Sakagami had said we were late, but that was only because we had gotten things in order before going after him. Kudou would be

wasting his time if he were to search the fortress for them now, and in the event he realized they weren't there anymore, Shiran was guarding them. Her combat ability rivaled that of the Great White Spider of the Depths, so she could deal with anything that wasn't too extreme. At the very least, she could deal with Anton, who was likely on the move targeting the surviving students.

The situation was progressing largely how we anticipated it would. There was just one thing I didn't plan for. I didn't expect Kudou to show himself like this. I thought we could just defeat Berta and recapture Sakagami.

Now that it had come to this, I couldn't possibly let Kudou get away. Some of his forces had probably gone with Anton, thinning out his available backup. Now it was a matter of whether the other thing we'd prepared beforehand would go well...

"Magnificent, Senpai." A dry clapping cut off my thoughts. Kudou lowered his hands, and his gently curved lips opened once more. "Not only did you bring down Juumonji, you even figured out my identity."

"Sorry to burst your bubble while you're praising me, but I didn't take down Juumonji, and it was thanks to Mikihiko that we realized that Sakagami wasn't a monster tamer."

"There's no need to be so humble. All of that is a part of your strength."

This conversation was making me uncomfortable, like an itching in my brain. Something was strange here. He was very calm for someone whose schemes had been foiled. He actually looked pleased.

"I heard the details of what happened from Anton. It was a splendid victory," Kudou said in a lively tone.

"What are you getting at...?"

I stared at his face. Unbelievably, he was being serious. I could tell from his gaze that his praise was no exaggeration.

"That phrase you said to the elf, 'This is the world where wishes come true,' it came from the very first savior of this world, right? You've proven those words correct, Senpai. Your group was able to stop Juumonji's violence because of your feelings. This world isn't simply one where the strong can do whatever they want. Both she and you are truly magnificent. I believe that from the very bottom of my heart."

This conversation resembled the one I'd had with Shiran when she regained her heart, yet it differed so much it made me feel nauseous. I had in fact denied Kudou's claim that the strong could do whatever they wanted in this world. I'd thought of it as no more than an offering to his departed soul.

So what was with this conversation now? My feelings were definitely getting across to him. He wouldn't have brought it up and

praised us so if they hadn't. And yet he felt hopelessly distant from us.

"Why, Kudou?" I practically groaned out. "Why did you support Juumonji's madness? You know how it feels to be oppressed by irrational violence, don't you? So, why...?"

"How it feels to be oppressed by irrational violence,' you say. Of course. I know that full well," Kudou replied, nodding calmly. His eyes were so tranquil one would never think he was backed into a corner. "I mean, I experienced the Colony's destruction just as you did, Senpai."

"What...?"

"I was also left on the verge of death in that flaming wreck, you see."

Kudou's cheerful confession left me perplexed. This was different from what I'd heard.

"But you were in one of the huts in the Woodlands, and Shiran rescued you together with Sakagami, right? Didn't one of the exploration team members who'd stayed behind guide you to that hut?"

"That was apparently the case for everyone else in the hut, yes. Not me, though. No one helped me out of the Colony. I merely stumbled by the hut afterward. Sakagami was the only person who knew this, but everyone hated him. Well, even if that wasn't the case, he probably wouldn't have told anyone the details."

Kudou chuckled briefly before continuing.

"As you know, Sakagami was quite the cruel bastard. I knew him even before coming to this world. On that day in the Colony, he escaped by leaving me behind as a sacrifice."

I didn't respond, so Kudou went on.

"After being left behind like that...I went through serious hell. The fact that I managed to survive... Well, I can only chalk it up to luck. After I finally got away from the Colony, I wandered through the forest for a few days. Starvation, pain, anxiety, and loneliness all tore my heart apart. Thinking back on it now, it's a miracle I managed to survive to stand here today."

I was wholly taken aback as I listened to him retell his story with a smile on his face.

An acquaintance had betrayed him, he'd nearly been killed, but he survived out of dumb luck. Unable to trust anyone, he wandered all alone through the forest. He'd been afraid of being killed by an atrocious monster at any moment, but even if that didn't happen, starvation and thirst hung overhead.

Whose story was that exactly?

Seeing me speechless, Kudou chuckled once more.

"Could it be that you went through a similar experience, Senpai?"

I gasped. It was like he had read my mind. I stared back at him in wonder. The only ones who knew of what I went through when the Colony fell were Lily and my other servants. There was no way he could have known.

“How do you...know that...?” I asked, my voice growing stern.

“I can tell,” Kudou answered, his smile remaining as it was. “We resemble each other, after all.”

“Don’t screw with me.”

There had certainly been a time I thought Kudou and I might have resembled each other. However, that was only because we had both been trampled down by violence. Nothing more. I never even imagined our experience would be so similar. Even so, there had to be a reason he knew this.

“Kudou, what do you know?”

“Things that you don’t,” he replied with conviction. “Especially concerning our powers.”

Knowledge of the cheats we visitors possessed... How could he declare that, having gone through the same experiences as I had? Just perhaps, the “resemblance” Kudou referred to was actually regarding our ability to tame monsters...? But what relation was there between similar inherent abilities and similar experiences upon coming to this world?

It’s just a coincidence. Yes... Nothing more than a coincidence. There’s no relation at all... Is that really, really true? Two people who shared similar abilities and experiences... Was such a coincidence really possible? If this was in fact an inevitability, Kudou knew something I didn’t. Now that I thought of it, Juumonji also seemed to know something about cheats that I didn’t. Meaning, just maybe...

“Kudou, you’ve been in contact with the expeditionary force?”

“Huh? How do you know that?”

This was the first time his constant smile began to fade. His eyes widened ever so slightly while I narrowed mine.

“You...or I guess, Sakagami, had to plan the attack with Juumonji somehow. So it’s a pretty natural conclusion. Not that I have any proof.”

“Oh. It was a leading question?”

Kudou realized his own blunder and smiled bitterly. Just like Juumonji and Sakagami, Kudou had been in contact with a common cooperator within the expeditionary force. This was likely where he’d learned all sorts of things I knew nothing about.

But if Kudou was connected to someone in the expeditionary force, why didn’t he tell them or Juumonji that Sakagami was nothing but a scapegoat? I had a mountain of questions to ask him now.

“You’re going to tell me everything you know.”

This was my chance now that I had him cornered like this. Gerbera's legs skittered about. Lily gathered her mana. Asarina snarled. Berta growled. All the other monsters Kudou brought with him also postured themselves for battle.

"I don't mind telling you what I can," Kudou said, maintaining his transparent smile within the tense atmosphere. Then he shrugged. "I came here planning to tell you everything anyway, depending on the circumstances."

"What...?" I scowled at him. Though he was willing to talk, his wording made me uneasy. "The way you put it almost makes it seem like—"

"Yes. I'd planned to speak with you here from the get-go," he said with a grin, confirming my doubts.

Before I could fully understand the meaning behind this, the forest was suddenly astir.

"What the...?"

Trees cracked, thickets snapped, and something gouged out the ground. Blade met blade, and something smashed into a shield, perhaps breaking it. It was the tumult of a battle.

"U-Ugh..."

A woman with gray hair and wearing white clothes and a mask groaned as she leaped out of the gloomy forest. Countless shadowy swords flew through the air and chased her.

"Rose?!"

The woman, Rose, had a shadowy blade sticking out of her collar as she retreated to my position.

"My apologies, Master. I made a miscalculation," she said in a grave tone, pulling the blade out and throwing it to the ground.

She wasn't here by coincidence, of course. I had actually rendezvoused with her earlier. One reason we were late chasing Sakagami was because we had gone to meet up with Rose and left Katou with the Alliance Knights.

I had told Rose to hide herself and cut off our enemies' path of retreat while we drew their attention. However, that plan failed due to the obstruction of a single powerful monster. My eyes shot open at the sight of a familiar-looking shadow coming out from the darkness of the trees.

"Anton...?!" I couldn't mistake this near three-meter-tall shadowy form for anything else.

The doppelqueen Anton hastened to her king's side, followed by an army of doppelgangers.

"Why is Anton here?"

She was supposed to be searching Fort Tilia for the other students so she could eat them... One of my predictions was off the mark.

“Everything up until using Sakagami as bait was exactly as you said, Senpai,” Kudou said to me. “However, this wasn’t so I could target the other students while I drew you out. I kept Sakagami alive so that I could call you here and speak with you, just as we’re doing now.”

“Speak...with *me*?”

I doubted my ears. This was a completely unexpected turn of events. I found it quite unbelievable at first, but now that he mentioned it, this did make sense. Kudou’s amicable attitude toward me hadn’t changed all this time. I thought he was just being confident, but if that’s not what it was, if Kudou had no hostile intentions toward me from the very beginning...

“Is that why you went out of your way to show yourself like this?” I asked.

“I’m glad you understand.”

“No, I don’t. What could you possibly have to speak with me about?”

I couldn’t hide my bewilderment, and this only widened Kudou’s grin. He wasn’t reserved at all. It was as if he was smiling directly at a friend.

“Hey, Senpai. Want to join forces with me?”

Kudou’s suggestion was an unforeseeable request. To me, at least.

“Join forces...?”

“Yes. You saw Juumonji and Sakagami, didn’t you? The scary part about thugs like that is that there are countless others just like them. They’re the same as cockroaches. And their fears and anxieties are contagious. At first, their paranoia from being teleported to this world made them fear that their neighbor might kill them, but that fear has now become a reality. Even those who laughed it off as a delusion yesterday can’t help but suspect those around them today. Now that it’s come to this, they’re no different from falling dominoes. You shouldn’t be joining forces with people who are liable to tumble over at any time.”

“So I should join you?” I took a slow breath in. I had to, to escape the impact of what I’d just heard. “I understand what you’re saying...but I can’t trust you, and you can’t trust me, right?”

“You’re an exception.”

“An exception? How convenient. Are you trying to tell me to believe in you?”

“Of course, I will put in the effort for you to trust me,” Kudou replied with a nod. Even though the impact from his last words had yet to subside, he then dropped an even bigger bombshell. “How about, as proof of my trust, I tell you about my ability?”

“What...?”

“Just as you know, my power allows me to manipulate monsters. Currently, my upper limit is 735 individuals. I can’t control them remotely, but I can give them set orders beforehand. One big problem is that I can’t manipulate monsters beyond a certain level of strength. It seems you’re somewhat different in that regard.”

His very life hinged on this kind of information, especially considering the nature of his ability. Despite this, Kudou spoke in a light tone as if he were speaking with a trustworthy ally.

“In my case, I need to train them from square one if I want a powerful monster under my command. That’s how I raised Anton and Berta. As for the method... Hmmm. Have you ever heard of the kudoku poison jar? To put it simply, I manipulate them all to kill each other. That way I can sort out the strongest specimens while strengthening them at the same time. It’s like killing two birds with one stone. So about that last part, it’s apparently more efficient to gain strength by eating the meat of the fallen rather than just killing them.”

Kudou unveiled his secrets, including his own weaknesses, as if he were chatting about idle gossip. He didn’t hesitate; he actually seemed proud. I could only assume he had some screws loose. Was his plan to confuse me by saying random things? But everything he was saying felt perfectly logical.

Moreover, his story just now reminded me of something else. I stole a glance down at Asarina. As a variant of a bullet creeper, she functioned by sucking my mana. However, that was nothing more than an alteration of a bullet creeper’s original parasitic behavior. Bullet creepers shot seeds into their prey where new sprouts would form. It was the same as what Asarina was doing to me. In other words, the bullet creepers got mana from the corpse they were preying upon. I had never thought of it this way before, but acquiring mana by eating an enemy actually wasn’t all that strange.

The fact that his words fell in line with something I’d found out independently gave credibility to everything he was saying. It also made sense why he fed Juumonji and Watanabe’s corpses to his servants as a ploy to gain more power. All the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. Only now, the giant hole in the final picture stood out all the more.

“Why are you telling me all this...?” I asked.

Kudou stared at me as I stood there in bewilderment. He directed a passionate gaze at me, bordering on innocence.

“Because you’re similar to me, Senpai.”

“This again?” I said with a sigh. “So what if our powers and circumstances are similar?”

I shook my head, but Kudou laughed cheerfully. It was like just speaking with me was unbearably fun for him.

“No, I’m not talking about our powers or circumstances. We’re similar in a much more fundamental way.”

“What do you mean...?”

“This is exactly why I want you,” Kudou said, maintaining his amicable smile. He looked like some sort of unfamiliar and indescribable creature to me. “I suppose it’s reasonable you don’t understand what I’m getting at. So, let me tell you one more thing about the power we all possess. What exactly is it? Haven’t you ever wondered?”

What exactly was this power we visitors from afar were given? This was certainly a question I’d considered during our fight against Juumonji. It was no exaggeration to say that this power had run rampant and caused this entire incident. Incidentally, we knew nothing of it beyond the fact that it was “given to those who descend upon this world.” Even though I knew I was dancing to Kudou’s tune, I couldn’t help but listen to him carefully.

“Majima-senpai, have you ever thought about *why* your power took on such a shape? To put it another way, why did we end up gaining similar powers?” Kudou cast his gaze over to the monsters around him, then to my servants. “I dislike calling this power a cheat. Calling it a blessing like they do here is also questionable. I mean, these descriptions are far removed from the true nature of this power. Mystical abilities falling into your lap without an ounce of emotion within them? But that only applies to the large majority of the riffraff.”

Kudou looked straight into my eyes.

“For example, how about you, Senpai? You’re different, right? Your power should be charged with plenty of your feelings.”

“How do you know that...?” I couldn’t deny his assumption at all. I had no choice but to urge him to continue.

“I can tell. I mean, that’s the true nature of our power.” Kudou paused and put his hand to his chest. “This power...is based on our wishes.”

“Our wishes...?” I repeated in a daze. It was far beyond my expectations. Or perhaps, exactly the opposite of them.

“I don’t know the minute details of how it works, but mana exists in this world. Thoughts have an effect on reality here. Once a thought grows beyond a certain level of strength, when a wish takes shape deep within our souls, our inherent abilities as visitors manifest. Does this ring a bell to you, Senpai?”

“...”

I had never noticed my own ability to tame monsters back in the Colony. I’d thought this was because I hadn’t met any monsters within the safety of our dwellings and had only become self-aware of it when

I met Lily. However, even if it wasn't that I hadn't realized it yet but rather that I had obtained it at that time, there wasn't really any inconsistency with how things turned out. Although, it wasn't like I could just accept everything he said.

"Hang on, if that's the case... What about the warriors? They all have pretty much the same power, right?"

"They simply failed to reach their potential. Those who, despite not having a definitive wish, have some groundless conviction in themselves end up like that. Such conviction is no different from an unconsciously formed powerful thought. 'I came to this world, so doesn't that make me special?' 'I hope it does.' 'No, it must be so.' 'I'm definitely special.' Just like that. This is the root of their superhuman strength. Their delusions of grandeur granted them empty power with no emotions behind it."

I recalled the way Juumonji and Watanabe acted like they were the saviors of the world... I didn't feel like I could refute Kudou's claim. In which case, the reason nearly a third of the students became warriors was because...we were high schoolers? High schoolers were old enough to understand a bit about reality. Not all of them had such childish convictions. If perhaps a middle school had been teleported here, the ratio of warriors might've been much larger.

"But the saviors of the past all possessed power, right? Regardless of whether they were warriors or possessed more specific abilities, it shouldn't have been all that easy for every single one of them to secure power like that."

"You've got it the wrong way around, Senpai. We visitors aren't treated as saviors because we have power. We get treated as saviors *first*. Humans more or less think of themselves as special. They *want* to believe they are. So, when they're treated as beyond special in this world, it's only normal for them to feel like it, right?"

"So, the order is backward? It's not, 'they had power so they became saviors,' but rather, 'they were treated like saviors and thus gained power'...?"

"It's a rather well-made system, in my opinion," Kudou said with a sarcastic smile. "This is the world where wishes come true."

"Oh..."

Those were the words the first savior had left behind. Who could've possibly thought they had such a meaning behind them?

"This system is meaningless if the saviors know of it beforehand. They have to really *feel* like they want to do it, after all. That's why the humans of this world don't know about it either. The only ones who do know are probably people from that church we heard about. They might have even made the interpretation of the first savior's words vague on purpose."

“Now that I think of it, Juumonji said his power was for the sake of returning home. Is this system the reason he believed he could?”

“I bet it is. If his desire to return home were to manifest as power, then he would probably gain the ability to do so.”

“Then he really would’ve been able to go back to our world?”

“Who knows? Maybe he could have. I have no idea. I’m not interested,” Kudou said in a suddenly cold tone and shrugged.

“However, regardless of whether it was possible, that’s what he was led to believe. I didn’t take part in any of that, so I don’t know the details.”

“Led to believe... By the person who’s been leaking you guys information?”

“Yes, the person who knows who I am but kept it from Juumonji. I wouldn’t be surprised if they also instigated Juumonji’s actions here.”

A cold chill ran down my spine. Tempting Juumonji to go on a rampage, letting hundreds of people in the fortress die, and keeping silent about Kudou in the process... There had to be some extreme malice behind all that. Juumonji and Kudou had carried out the incident with their own hands, but there was someone out there who had truly set everything in motion.

“Who is it...?”

It would take a fairly large sample size for someone to realize that cheats were influenced by our wishes. In other words, someone would need to know a lot about the exploration team members who had special abilities in order to see how their desires and powers matched up. However, there weren’t that many of them. Among the three hundred cheaters, there were around ten like the Skanda Iino Yuna who possessed warrior-like physical abilities plus an inherent ability. Even including those like me who had no physical abilities, there were maybe thirty of us.

Pretty much all of them were part of the exploration team’s leadership. No one but the upper echelon could mingle with the majority of them. This was a nightmare. The first expeditionary force, comprising over a hundred cheaters, definitely had the most potential for violence in this world. Now, their brass had already been infected by malice.

“Are you interested? If you cooperate with me, then I will of course tell you everything I know, including about the one who connects us all.”

“Aren’t they your ally?”

“The only one I want as an ally is you, Senpai,” Kudou said, stretching out his hand to me. “Have you begun to understand yet? We went through similar circumstances, and we obtained similar

powers; we share the greatest turning point of our lives. That's why I want to join hands with you."

"Join hands, and do what? Are you planning on picking a fight with the expeditionary force or something?"

I couldn't deny we were somewhat similar. If Kudou awakened to his ability because he went through hell and lost all trust in humans, then we were one of a kind. However...

"What wish gave you your powers?" I asked.

Kudou's smile deepened. "Do you remember when we sank into despair, when our wishes transformed into power?"

"Of course I do..." I couldn't forget it, not the despair nor the joy.

"Then try recalling it, that very first memory of ours."

He stimulated memories of my past. Before I knew it, I was no longer in the forest. I was now where my story truly began, inside that cave. I was in tatters and all on my own. The only difference from back then was that Kudou was standing before me. His eyes reflected his own hopeless experience.

His smiling lips began retelling his own despair. "My arms hurt. My legs hurt. My whole body hurts. Still, the pain in my heart is the most unbearable."

It hurts. It's agonizing. This despair will shatter my heart far before my body breaks.

"This is where my life ends."

Death is closing in on me.

"I don't want to die in a place like this."

No. I don't want this. I don't want to die.

"At that time, a certain thought came to mind."

Yes, a thought did come to mind. That was the very beginning of the story that brought me here. No matter how much time passed, I would never forget it.

I prayed. I prayed for one single thing.

Someone...save me.

Both my body and heart were shattered. I couldn't trust anyone. Nevertheless, I wanted someone by my side. I prayed from the bottom of my heart, and Lily answered. That led me to who I was today. That logic also applied to Kudou, in a manner of speaking...

"The world that made me go through this hell is better off destroyed. That's what I prayed for." That was exactly why he had attacked Fort Tilia. "With monsters at my beck and call, I'll be a Demon King, in a sense. As such, I can understand why everyone hurt and nearly killed me back then. That's why I need to kill humans too, and destroy this world. Such weak beings, who so easily degenerate into such repulsive creatures, have no value left alive."

I figured it out as we spoke. Kudou Riku was odd. He looked calm,

but he was missing a screw in his head. Something wasn't working right anymore. Furthermore, he affirmed this himself.

For example, I took pride in being a master, leading the girls and living by their side. I'd only really realized it after that night in Fort Tilia with Lily, but this pride was the pillar that supported my life here in this vastly different world. For their sake, I would even cast my life away. That was why I was here and breathing today.

Kudou Riku was the same. He was proud of his hopelessly broken way of life, somehow maintaining his sense of self. He was standing here today because of his hatred toward the world that ran him down, because even his own life didn't matter so long as he could destroy it.

I came to understand Kudou. He was a lunatic, but I could still get his logic. I could've ended up just like him if something had gone amiss. Just as he said, we were in fact similar.

It could be said that we shared the same starting point. We shared the same foundation. Because of that, we could understand each other better than anyone else. Even Kudou's fixation on me made sense.

"Fortunately, we're highly compatible. In this forest overflowing with monsters, we can surely destroy the very world itself."

According to Kudou, his ability allowed him to manipulate a large number of monsters to his will, but he couldn't manipulate powerful ones. Basically, he could only control anything lower than a rare monster. In contrast, the nature of my power granted hearts to monsters who were rare and beyond. We were rather compatible. We covered for the deficiencies in each other's abilities. It would take time, but we could acquire enough power to match the other students by building up strength within the Woodlands.

"It's true. We could probably destroy the entire world if we joined forces," I said.

"Yes! I'm sure of it!"

"But... Have you ever thought of it this way instead?" I asked, watching Kudou brace himself for my next words. "We could also *save* the world."

This entire world was under constant threat from the expanding Woodlands and the monsters that dwelled within. They had no way of surviving other than relying on the "saviors" who descended upon them once a century. If there was a king who could make all of the monsters obey him, it would be a different story. I was hoping such a prospect would open his eyes, just for a moment...

"*Save* the world? Why would we do something like that?" he answered. It was just as I feared, but I wasn't disappointed. "I'm the Demon King. I'm not the one to save humanity. I'm the one to destroy it."

There was no hesitation in his voice, but I already knew there

wouldn't be. I knew it all too well. Much like how I would always continue being those girls' master, Kudou could only bare his fangs at the world as the king of all monsters. In any case, I cursed Sakagami's foolishness for creating such a monster.

"There is nothing we can't accomplish as fellow Demon Kings. Come with me, Senpai."

Kudou stretched out his hand once more. I looked at his unchanging smile, then shook my head.

"I'm no Demon King. So I can't go with you."

"What are you then?" Kudou asked, his amicable smile still unchanging. "Do you mean to say you're going to live on as a savior?"

"No. I don't plan on doing that either."

I wasn't a hero. However, that didn't mean I was a monster like Kudou. So what did that make me? The answer was obvious.

"I'm not a savior, not the Second King; I'm just their master. Nothing more. That's all I need to be."

"Is that so...?"

Kudou sighed. He still had a faint smile on his face. Even though he'd hoped I would give him a favorable response, he came here expecting that I wouldn't, much like I did with my earlier question.

"How unfortunate," he said. Then he straddled Berta's back. "I won't give up, though."

He turned his back to us. He was planning to run away.

"Tch. Gerbera!"

Gerbera charged in at my command. Countless shadowy swords and monsters moved to block her path. Considering the massive losses Kudou's forces had suffered, we had an advantage here. However, with Anton and Berta present and dozens of monsters ready to fight to the death, we wouldn't be able to catch him if he ran away. Kudou's figure rode off deep into the darkness of the forest.

"When you're no longer able to endure the cruelty of this world, then come and see me! I'll welcome you with open arms!"

He maintained his friendly attitude to the very end. And just like that, the other monster tamer vanished from sight.



"I guess he got away..."

Just from the fact that I'd miscalculated Anton being here, I already knew we couldn't capture Kudou anymore. Regardless, I still regretted letting him get away. All that was left before us was a pile of dead monsters that Kudou had used as sacrificial pawns. Not even Sakagami's half-eaten corpse was here. He was quite thorough.

Unable to repay the debt for injuring Ayame, Gerbera stomped her legs about. Rose lowered her bloody axe and appeared to be deep in

thought beneath her mask. Asarina sank back into my hand, while Lily leaned against me and called out to me anxiously.

“Master...”

“Shall we head back? It’s finally over. We’ll have to let Shiran and the others know.” I let out a small sigh, then smiled at Lily. I was keenly aware that it was not actually over.

I urged my companions on and began walking, but I suddenly looked back in the direction Kudou vanished. This was actually the beginning of our battle with Kudou. Was I to yield to the cruelty of this world and take his hand to become a Demon King? Or would I be capable of stopping him? Even if we didn’t directly cross blades, my battle with Kudou was sure to continue from this day onward, until the time things were settled...

Lily sensed the feelings coming and going through my heart and strengthened her embrace around my arm. As I focused on her warmth, I walked back toward the fortress.

Extra Story: My Dear Savior

~Shiran's POV~

My brother, who worked at Fort Tilia as a member of the Alliance Knights, returned to our village. It was his first time home in three years.

“Have you been doing well, Shiran?”

“Yes! It’s wonderful to see you in good health, Brother!”

The job of an Alliance Knight was harsh. For the sake of protecting humanity from the threat of the Woodlands, they ventured into that monster-filled forest and constantly exposed their lives to danger. I always worried such an environment would change my brother completely. However, I knew right away that this was a needless anxiety. His face was more scarred than I remembered, but his kind and gentle expression remained much as it was before.

“I see that little Shiran has grown up quite a lot.”

“Geez! How many years do you think it’s been since we last met?”

I was just seven years old when my brother had left the village as a knight. I was very much attached to him at the time and always followed him everywhere. My father died right after I was born, so my brother was like a foster parent to me. I was very proud of my strong and gentle brother who continuously protected our village as a member of the village watch even before setting forth to Fort Tilia as a knight.

“Huh? Brother? Who is that?”

“Hmm. So this is the sister you spoke of. She resembles you.”

My brother came back home with a woman. For a moment, I thought he’d brought back his new bride. My stepsister, who had given birth to Kei, died four years ago. My brother was still young, only twenty-four, so it wouldn’t be strange for him to take a second wife.

“What? This guy’s wife? Haha. Not at all.”

In truth, I was just jumping to conclusions. This woman with short silver hair was the eighteen-year-old commander, before she’d assumed a post in the Alliance Knights.

My family served as the chief of our small reclamation village. In most cases, chief families bore the duty of protecting this country from monsters. Many members of my family had served as great knights, including my brother, and we’d had a deep connection to the royal

family who led the Alliance Knights for generations.

After the woman laughed at my misunderstanding, I turned bright red. I then turned pale, realizing what exactly I had said to the princess of this country. Fortunately, the commander didn't seem offended. Actually, she looked more pleased than she let on.

The days my brother spent at home went by quietly. I was with him at all times other than when I was doing my job in the village. On the other hand, Kei, who was turning five that year, greatly feared strangers. The last time she'd met her own father was when she was two years old. It was inevitable given her age, but my brother looked somewhat lonely because of this.

I had my brother accompany me several times during my sword training while he was back.

"Brother? Will I be able to protect everyone one day like you do?"

"Hehe. Let's see... In ten years, I'm sure you'll become an excellent knight. I bet I won't even hold a candle to you. You'll definitely be able to protect a whole lot of people. Keep at it."

My brother was one of the foremost knights, even among all of the Alliance Knights. I didn't think he would tell me such a thing. I was quite shocked. I was of course happy. I was also glad that I had seriously continued my training without slacking off even once. I couldn't even imagine what I would be like at twenty years old, but I had to keep trying harder and harder.

My brother's short homecoming came to an end, and he returned to Fort Tilia. I kept his words close to my heart as I continued to pour in even more effort than before. Trying to catch up to him was tremendously difficult, but it wasn't painful.

Two years later, when I turned twelve, I headed to Fort Tilia with my brother. It was decided I would serve as his squire. This was brought on because I had successfully formed a contract with a spirit. This was considered very early, even among great spiritualists.

All of my efforts were paying off. I felt the spirit had acknowledged my feelings. I could finally fight shoulder to shoulder with my brother. I was happy. I felt blessed. And in my very first battle...my brother died right before my eyes.

At the time, the fortress had suddenly gotten busy because of the arrival of an influential imperial noble. It was common for the Alliance Knights to be particularly busy during such times because of the work foisted upon them. Regardless, it was pretty rare for a squire like me to be dispatched.

I heard rumors of something the noble did or didn't say, but as a

mere squire, I didn't know the truth of the situation. The commander happened to be away from the fortress at the time. Even if she had been there, it was common for others to push jobs onto the Alliance Knights. However, this time it was accompanied by misfortune that far exceeded any expectations.

The monsters we were to exterminate were greater in number than anticipated. They ambushed us and drew us into a battle we weren't prepared for. We ended up with no way of retreating. The unlucky force of thirty knights was nearly annihilated. The only reason several of us survived was because of the skilled knights, including my brother, who sacrificed themselves for us.

After barely escaping that place with my life and receiving treatment at the fortress, I sat atop my bed, cradling my knees. As a mere squire, I hadn't been given my own room, but the people I shared a room with were all in a strategy meeting, leaving me all alone.

My tears didn't flow. I didn't feel sad my brother had died, nor did I feel happy I had survived. I only felt despondent, liberated from the lingering heat of a battle between life and death. I gazed at the wall in front of me in a daze.

I couldn't protect a thing, I suddenly thought to myself.

"In ten years, I'm sure you'll become an excellent knight. I bet I won't even hold a candle to you."

Would my twenty-year-old self have been able to do something? Regardless, I was nothing more than a twelve-year-old child. That was why I had lost someone dear to me...

"You'll definitely be able to protect a whole lot of people. Keep at it."

"Yes, Brother," I said to the man in my memories.

He was right. If I wanted to protect what was dear to me, I had to become much, much stronger. I couldn't wait until I was twenty.

"Shiran, may I come in?"

The commander had returned to the fortress from her other duties. She dropped by my room the day after my brother had been entombed within the mausoleum.

"What have you...?" When she entered the room, her eyes shot open upon seeing my haggard figure.

"Com...mander...?"

My voice was so hoarse I didn't even recognize it as my own. It was shocking. My exhausted body lay collapsed on the floor and wouldn't budge. It was hard for me to even breathe. It felt like my heart would stop if I loosened my focus. Still...there was worth in doing this. I could see four floating spirits of different colors through my blurry vision.

Contracting with spirits was a special magic only available to elves. When forming a contract, the spirit tested the spiritualist. It required a diligent soul and the purest of prayers to pass. I'd succeeded in doing so three times in a row. This time, my earnest prayer of wanting to protect others was no lie, but the result was still nothing short of a miracle. By the time the commander went to call someone, I'd passed out entirely.

Several days later, I opened my eyes to the commander hitting my cheek and hugging me so hard it hurt. Her body was trembling. An incomprehensible feeling welled up within me, and I broke into tears for the first time since my brother's death. I was so sad, helpless, and in agony. I knew the commander shared these feelings, which made it even more painful.

I swore once more right then and there that I would fight to protect everyone, including my brother's share. Thanks to the commander, I didn't try to recklessly contract with more spirits, but I devoted myself even more to my training. Within a year, I was officially dispatched to the Woodlands as a knight.

I assertively sought missions into the Woodlands more than any other. One year passed, then two. I survived life-and-death situations many times over and became stronger from real combat experience. There were those who were stronger than me in either sword or magic, but there were none at my level in using both at once, let alone when I made full use of the spirits' favor. Before I knew it, I was regarded as the strongest knight in the north.

However, people kept dying before my eyes, or out of my reach. I didn't feel like I had gotten stronger. I'd managed to save people many times, but still, the casualties I prevented were just a drop in a lake.

Being a splendid knight wasn't good enough. This was about the time my hope in the advent of a great savior from another world began to swell. The disappointment I felt toward myself and the powerlessness I felt within me coalesced into dreams of salvation. Unable to do anything about this myself, time passed...and my hopes finally became reality.

It began with the arrival of a single savior at Fort Tilia. Furthermore, Fort Ebenus to the east had received an unprecedented number of them—one hundred in total. Not only that, they informed us there were many more left behind in the Depths.

I ended up being dispatched to the Depths to rescue the saviors who were left behind. There was no way I could possibly complain about heading into the most dangerous lands of the world. No matter the difficulties, no matter the grief I endured, they were nothing if I could find the saviors.

It was a terribly difficult operation. We met with trouble along the way when we lost contact with a force we were meant to join up with. Despite all that, I managed to safely secure the saviors. And then, on my way back, I met a certain boy and girl.

“Please put away your swords! We’re not monsters!”

After I challenged their identities, a boy came out of hiding alongside a beautiful girl. He called himself Majima Takahiro. He had a diligent look to him. Nothing about his features stood out, but I could sense a strong will in his gaze.

Quite curiously, I kept thinking about his eyes. Perhaps I had a hunch at this point already. I only realized this later, but that gaze was the same as my brother’s when I was young.

I had the opportunity to mingle with Takahiro on multiple occasions after that. During that time, I learned that much like myself and my brother, he devoted everything he had to protecting what was dear to him. I had misunderstood things. I had pushed my own delusions onto his figure. I learned of the weakness in my own heart.

There were no heroes straight out of dazzling tales...but there was still a great savior.

An enormous army of monsters attacked Fort Tilia. When I tried to confine Juumonji Tatsuya, who had guided them here and was trying to slaughter everyone in the fortress, I lost my life. At that time, my very being, all of my feelings, everything was supposed to fade away into obscurity.

Yet something picked up my wish, which had fallen and scattered to the ground, and put it back together. Hope was once more granted to me. He was different from a dazzling hero from the tales, and he would definitely deny this, but to me, he was the savior I was meant to fight alongside as a knight.

What else could this be called other than a blessing? That was why I chose to fight. I would fight by his side, for the sake of everything we so dearly wished to protect.

“Let’s go, Takahiro. Onward to our battlefield.”



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Monster Tamer 4





"Morning Master"

LILY

MIMIC SLIME



AYAME

SLIMFOX



MAJIMA TAKAHIRO

2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

ASARINA

PARASITE CREEPER

















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